

Culture as Protein and Profit

Marshall Sahlins

**Cannibals and Kings:
The Origins of Cultures**
by Marvin Harris.
Random House, 239 pp., \$10.00;
\$2.95 (paper)

In this book of modest size, Marvin Harris explains the origins of war, capitalism, the state, and male supremacy. He reveals the true meaning of the Eucharist, tells why Hindus believe in sacred cows, and discloses the logic behind Jewish dietary laws. He also explains why agriculture was invented, expounds the causes of matrilineal descent, and uncovers the reasons for Aztec sacrifices.

Perhaps the accomplishment was not that difficult, since all these cultural developments, according to Harris's

theory, have essentially the same explanation. The theory is that the customs of mankind come and go according to their profitability. In a series of essays ranging in time from the Old Stone Age to nowadays, and in topic from tribal warfare in South America to the population of China, Harris argues that the evolutionary fate of cultural forms is determined by the degree that they contribute to people's well-being. Especially do customs rise or fall according to the amount of nourishing foods they provide. Every society is thus engaged in the production of these customs that will make effective use of the available resources. And all sorts of institutions, from cannibalism through capitalism, may be explained by a kind of ecological cost accounting: institutions come and go by virtue of the practical benefits they deliver relative to their material costs. This is the calculus of Harris's "cultural materialism." It is complemented by a theory of cumulative population growth, by the idea that population has a natural tendency to outrun resources, so that the application of the cost/benefit program becomes necessary for cultural survival. The overall view is that culture is business on the scale of history.

that human action is motivated by utility and ordered by rationality because no matter how grotesque the customary manner of survival, achieving it requires a prudent managing of one's material means. Even when we act impractically from some larger viewpoint, as by laying waste our national powers in getting and using private automobiles, our behavior tends to be experienced individually as a utilitarian project ("buying a car"). And no matter how spiritual or disinterested our ends may be, taken by themselves, our relation to them is typically economic. Hence going to a concert, "making a decent life for the children," or taking one's leisure appear as so many "utilities" among which people apportion their pecuniary resources. In the consciousness we have of our own existence, culture is busi-

nesslike. And where a society thus makes a fetish of the commodity, its anthropology risks making a commodity out of the fetish.

So we can follow Mr. Harris when he tells us that human sacrifice among the Aztecs had a sound scientific basis in nutrition. True the victim's heart was offered to the Sun, but the Indians often made a feast of the arms and legs, because they kept no large domestic beasts and needed the animal protein. Aztec sacrifice was no disembodied religious idea: it supplied a critical percentage of the US Daily Recommended Allowance of amino acids.¹ Harris writes:

Aztec cannibalism was not a perfunctory tasting of ceremonial tidbits. All edible parts were used in a manner strictly comparable to the

"Thus underneath the Aztecs were our brothers: they were doing what they did for a living. We can accept that claim. It is like the Fijian chiefs of the last century who, though they did not regard the human victim "in the shape of food," since cannibalism was "a custom intimately connected with the whole fabric of their society," nevertheless told the Europeans "that they indulged in eating [human flesh] because their country furnished nothing but pork, being destitute of beef and all other kinds of meat." The point was that the chiefs,

consumption of the flesh of domesticated animals. The Aztec priests can legitimately be described as ritual slaughterers in a state-sponsored system geared to the production and redistribution of substantial amounts of animal protein in the form of human flesh. Of course, the priests had other duties, but none had greater practical significance than their butchery.

This materialist theory of Aztec cannibalism, adapted by Harris from the work of Michael Harner of the New School, has received a lot of attention in the anthropological and popular press. I take it up in detail because it epitomizes the kind of social analysis Harris advocates. Especially it is typical for what it leaves out of account, since the prac-

tion with various sacrifices, different categories of people would ritually fast, bleed themselves, paint themselves, climb mountains, go into and come out of caves, fast, sing, recite, reciting, stage farces, drink pulque, and so forth, offer valuable gifts to the gods, take ceremonial baths, parade in the streets, play games, hold sham fights, practice chastity, hunt deer, sing and dance for days on end, beg alms, erect and adorn idols, prepare and eat special delicacies, and much else. Each sort of ritual required an appropriate costume or costumes, often of costly imported materials. Each ornament of these costumes, as the sixteenth-century scholar Fray Diego Durán says of priestly dress, "had its special meaning and mystery attached to it."

Besides human sacrifices, there were many offerings of quail and other animals. The human sacrifices were begun by putting the victims in fire or by an unequal gladiatorial combat, or else the victims passed directly under the famous obsidian knife, except for those who were drowned or pushed off high platforms. These sacrificial offerings were also of prescribed social categories: men or women, adults or children; they might necessarily be married or unmarried, unblemished youths or virgin maids. Most often they were captives or purchased slaves, more rarely criminals or citizens. At certain festivals the victims were gods, as represented by images made of seed paste, which were ceremoniously killed, carved, and eaten. The limbs of an unknown proportion of an uncertain number of human victims were likewise eaten.

Clearly the cultural content at issue, this stupendous system of sacrifice, is too rich, logically as well as practically, to be explained by the natural need for protein by which Harris proposes to account for it. To accept his view, we have to make some kind of bargain with the ethnographic reality, trading away what we know about it in order to understand it. Or at the least, it takes a heroic act of utilitarian faith to conclude that this sacrificial system was a way the Aztecs had for getting some meat.²

Perhaps that is why Mr. Harris makes

tical function of institutions is never adequate to explain their cultural structure. Not only is the content of what the Aztecs were doing left enigmatic by the idea that its purpose was protein, but such a purpose must appear bizarre when one considers what they were doing.

Sixteenth-century Spanish reports relate that the Aztecs held fixed festivals during each of the eighteen months of their solar calendar; these were interspersed with movable feasts timed to a 260-day ritual cycle. The central rites of each festival were sacrifices to one or more of the hundreds of gods, at one or more of dozens of temples. In connec-

exasperated by the foreigners' questions and criticisms, "simply wished to offer some excuse which might satisfy their inquisitors for the moment" (Berthold Seaman, *Viti: An Account of a Government Mission to the Vitian or Fijian Islands, 1860-1861*. Reprinted by Dawson of Pall Mall, 1973, p. 181). The irony of Seaman's use of "inquisitors" is only surpassed by the fact that in 1536, the chief of Texcoco (one of the cities of the famous Triple Alliance of ancient Mexico) was burned at the stake by the Inquisition for attempting to practice human sacrifice. However, it was not the Aztecs, any more than the Fijians, who needed to be taught that one could engage in large-scale human sacrifice without being meat-hungry.

¹The famous descriptions of the Aztec ceremonial cycle are by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, translated by Arthur Anderson and Charles Dibble, 12 books in 10 volumes (University of Utah, 1951-1975), especially Book II; and Fray Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, translated by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (University of Oklahoma Press, 1971). A good shorter summary is in Volume 2 of Abbé Clavigero's *History of Mexico*. Other sixteenth-century information cited here may be found in Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (Octagon Books, 1970); Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico* (Grossman Publishers, 1971); Fray Diego Durán, *Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain* (Orion Press, 1964); *The Conquistadors*, edited by Patricia de Fuentes (Orion Press, 1963); Motolinia's *History of the Indians of New Spain*, edited by Elizabeth A. Foster (Greenwood Press, 1973).

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a point of congratulating Michael Harner for having had the intellectual courage to propose the protein theory. Harner's scientific fortitude, according to Harris, finally rescued Aztec cannibalism from the obscurity to which it was long confined by an idealist scholarship. Not since the early Spanish chronicles—Díaz, Cortés, Sahagún, Durán, Motolinía, etc.—have we even known, according to Harris, how to describe Aztec cannibalism for what it was. Still, one could argue from the same historical sources that "cannibalism" as a cultural category was indeed invented by modern anthropologists. Since for the Aztecs the act was typically an aspect of sacrifice, dependent on the prior assimilation of the victim to the god, and thus it was the highest form of communion.

Such disagreement between the Western concept and the native category has recently been the subject of a lot of positivist cant. What is important here is that in a culinary theory of cannibalism the ritual as such is without motivation. Nor could it be of interest to Harris that the logic of Aztec sacrifice conforms to that in the classic texts of French sociology on the subject (notably



Hubert's and Mauss's *Sacrifice*). Offered as food to the god, the victim takes on the nature of a god. Consumed then by man, the offering transmits this divine power to man. Death is thus turned into life: what happens to the sacrificial victim may be made to happen in reverse to the one who sacrifices. ("Sacrifier" is the technical term for the party who both provides and benefits from the sacrifice. Among the Aztecs, the sacrificer was usually a warrior or merchant, donors respectively of prisoners and slaves; the sacrificial act itself was performed by priests.) But to achieve these benefits from sacrifice would necessarily require a double identification, which it is the purpose of the rituals to effect: between the sacrificer and the victim, and between the latter and the god.

The entire sacrificial process begins with the union of victim and sacrificer. When a warrior took a prisoner, he said, "He is as my beloved son"; the

"See Michael Harner, "The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice," *American Ethnologist*, February 1977. Harris gives Harner credit for having solved the "riddle" of Aztec sacrifice. Harner, however, noted that he formed his hypothesis independently of the Oxford don, Edward John Payne, who published the substance of it in 1899. (*History of the New World called America*, Vol. 2, pp. 550-551).

captive replied, "He is as my beloved father." By reason of this kinship, the sacrificer himself could not eat the captive—"Shall I, then, eat my own flesh?" He had to eat someone else's captive, and distribute the flesh of his own captive to certain notables and relations. Frequently the owner of the prisoner or slave had a nurturing part to play through the rituals preceding the death. The sacrificer's own body might be painted and dressed as a complement to the victim's. The victim in turn passed through several rites of consecration which brought him successively closer to the god.

Fray Diego Durán describes the way certain processions of prisoners were honored as they entered Mexico City. They were greeted with incense by priests, in the way gods are greeted. Other priests offered them special breads from the temples. Formally they were welcomed to a city whose splendors, they were reminded, they would see only because they would die there—but their death, it seems, would be enshrined in these same splendors: "We salute you and comfort you with these words.... You will die here but your

fame will live forever." A group of Huastec prisoners were distributed among the wards of the city, where they were treated "as if they had been gods," on the injunction of the victorious Aztec commander:

Behold, they are the Children of the Sun!

"Sahagún, Book 11, pp. 52-53.

"While there can be no question about the horror of Aztec human sacrifice, to state this does not exhaust its description, its function, or its meaning. So it seems superficial to make a point of this cruelty, as Harris does, by alluding to practices, such as dragging slaves up the temple steps by the hair, whose significance may seem self-evident to the Western reader, though in fact the Aztec sense is imperfectly understood. Harris does not mention that dragging by the hair figures rarely in sacrifice and was done primarily in certain rituals of the second month, which many commentators connect to maize farming. Nor does he note that the hair at this time had some special ritual value, since the owners shaved a portion of the victim's hair beforehand and kept it enshrined as a treasured relic. Still less, then, could we expect reference to the widespread use of hair as a generative symbol, subject of a celebrated essay by Edmund Leach ("Magical Hair"), which seems to fit very well into the specific logic of Aztec sacrifice.

"Durán, *History*, pp. 101-102.

Feed them well, let them be fat and desirable for sacrifice. On the day of the feast of our god. Let our god rejoice in them since they belong to him.

As enemies are thus assimilated to gods, so the high Aztec god Tezcatlipoca had as another name "Enemy" (Yaotl). Durkheim said that "god" is a way men figure to themselves the power of society, but only a slight modification of his theory is needed to take account of the fact that supernatural power is often a power external to society. What is beyond society, escaping its order, is precisely what is greater than it. Hence the widespread ritual value of enemies (and of the appropriation of their heads and bodies). The Spanish would both profit and suffer from this. By the Aztec interpretation the conquistadors were *teotl*, "images," "gods." If this helps to explain the initial ease of the conquest, it also suggests why Spanish descriptions of the subsequent hostilities picture the Aztecs as so bloodthirsty. Not that they weren't, but neither could the Spanish know their own worth as victims.

In traditional sacrifices, the Indian captives or slaves would have to be ritually constituted as godly. Before their ordeal they were often dressed and painted as idols. Some were given "divine wine," probably containing peyote, with effects simulating divine possession. Finally they were killed, usually on the pyramid, their hearts held up to the sun and their blood smeared about the god's sanctuary. But there remained the body, now also sacred matter and capable of useful effects.

⁷Durán, *History*, p. 108.

Rolled down the western steps of the temple, in a descent that at once paralleled the course of the sun and the Aztec metaphor of birth, the body was received and shared by the owners of the death. The cycle between sacrificer and god was thus closed by the mediation of the victim; the sacred and secular were brought into communication; the interchange of blessings, expiations, requests, favors, and gifts became possible. In the last moment, victims, gods, and communicants become one. The consumption of human flesh was thus deifying, not degrading. Precisely by conceiving sacrifice as an extension of the physiological functions of digestion, Harner and Harris abandon the possibility of understanding it, either as a ritual or as a necessity.

Human sacrifice was also a cosmological necessity in the Aztec scheme, a condition of the continuation of the world. Although this is widely known, certain aspects of it are worth emphasizing. Reproductive sacrifice, transforming death into life through the offering, was so implicated in social relations, politics, and economics that it ended by becoming true: Aztec culture was

"In most cases, the victim was dressed, painted and ornamented so as to represent the god who was being worshipped; and thus it was the god himself who died before his own image and in his own temple, just as all the gods accepted death in the first days for the salvation of the world. And when ritual cannibalism was practiced on certain occasions, it was the god's own flesh that the faithful ate in their bloody communion" (Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, Macmillan, 1962, p. 98).

reproduced by human sacrifice. The main relations of the Aztec universe were renewed by the blood of captives; since the sacrificial act was designed to represent these relations. We begin to understand why for the Aztecs blood was associated with flowers, and the great god of war figured as a Hummingbird—albeit as Huitzilopochtli, "Hummingbird-on-the-left"—who when nourished by the blood of captives restored fertility to the land. When the rains returned, the courtyard and image of the god were decked in floral tributes, and soldiers who had taken captives danced in the temple precincts with the harlots of the city. These valiant soldiers alone were permitted to woo in public; as for prostitutes, the Aztec term for them may be translated as "she who goes about giving pleasure or fragrance."

Yet the warrior who had thus reproduced the city was like a mother; and conversely, the mother in childbirth was engaged in battle. If she died, she shared with fallen warriors the noblest of afterlives, in the House of the Sun (also identified with the Hummingbird). "Certainly [childbirth] is our mortality, we who are women, for it is our battle." If the mother lived and bore a child, the midwife shouted war cries, "which meant that the woman... had taken a captive." Hence the warrior's prisoners, taken from external enemies to nourish the sun, were complemented by children purchased from around the city—in one instance, noble children according to Motolinia—and sacrificed in winter to the god of rain. The tears of the children were signs of the desired end.

⁸Sahagún, Book II, pp. 167, 180.

The warrior had another counterpart in the person of the merchant who likewise brought wealth into the city from a distance, notably the paraphernalia of sacrifice and of noble consumption.¹⁰ These things the merchants suffered under risks comparable to those of war. Hence they could themselves claim to be "captains and soldiers who, in a disguised fashion, go out to conquer." At the feast of the Hummingbird in the fifteenth solar month the merchants bought many slaves at market and sacrificed them alongside the warriors' captives. The war captives of this feast had been taken mainly from cordial enemies, in formal jousts with nearby cities whom it would not do to subjugate or exterminate, as they supplied the life blood of the state. Politically as well as culturally, the structure of the empire was conditioned by the system of human sacrifice.

This system gave sacrifice meaning sufficient not only to sustain its existence but also to encourage its own evolution. The source of its self-propulsion, its dynamic force, lies essentially in the form of its hubris. In Aztec myth as well as ritual men interchange with gods. In sacrifice men function as did those legendary gods whose original self-destruction set the sun in motion, even as the principal recipients of sacrifice, such as the great war god, were once men, deified after death by offerings. The principle of sacrifice is that the flowing of blood is equivalent to the motion of the world; and human

"To the extent that the nobility were also godly, these goods for their comparison are also equivalent to sacrificial paraphernalia.

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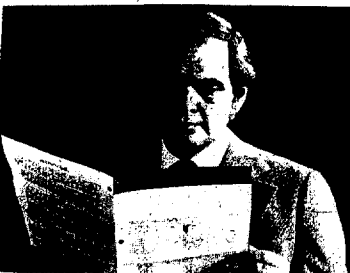
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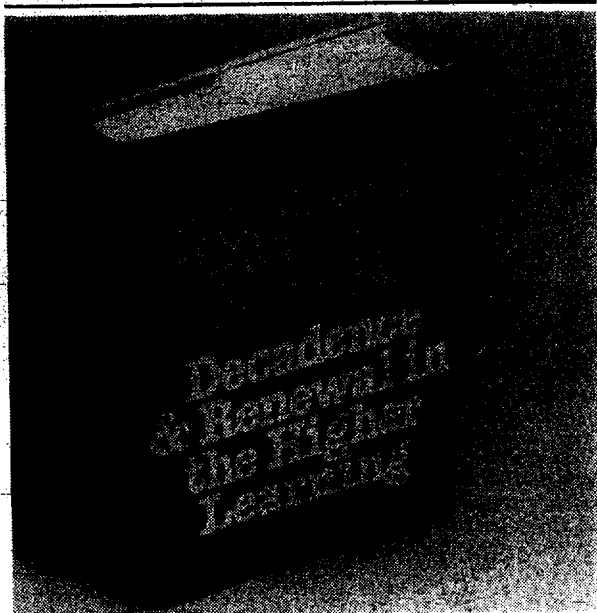
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sacrifice is specifically based on the principle that like nourishes like, like gives life to like. Where the supernatural power is also human, it must thus devour humanity, for the sake of some other humanity.

The whole system is a formula of potential disaster. The divine legitimacy of any emperor could be calculated by comparing the number of sacrifices he made with the blood shed by his most memorable predecessors. And any kind of external pressure, economic or political, would likely be met by an equal and opposite (or a greater) bloodletting; so that, as may be verified from events of Aztec history, the response to a catastrophe was to stage another catastrophe. There are well-known analogies to the Aztec pattern in the South Pacific where the "cannibalism" the Europeans so detested was greatly stimulated by their own presence in the nineteenth century—though population densities were declining and the fish were still running. But how many exotic examples do we need to be convinced that a people can engage in large-scale extermination of human beings for reasons far removed from material profit?

The idea that Aztec sacrifice was designed to supply human meat has in any case little economic cogency. Indeed, of all peoples of the Hemisphere who practiced intensive agriculture, the Aztecs probably had the greatest natural protein resources: the lakes of the Valley of Mexico, teeming with *animalitos* and algae processed for food, as well as fish, and, in the winter, millions of ducks.¹¹ There was no shortage of meat in the markets described by the Spanish conquerors. As for the costs and benefits of cannibalism, the historical accounts indicate the sacrifice business was running at a loss, owing to the high costs of upkeep of the stock and low yields in arm and thigh cuts. The trunks were considered by-products, fed to the carnivores in Moctezuma's zoo.

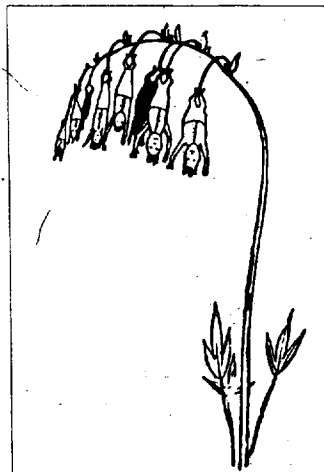
Moreover, everything that was fed to the sacrificial victims instead of being consumed directly represented a loss on the order of 80 or 90 percent, because only a fraction of the original nutritive values can be recovered once converted into an intermediary human form. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, generally

¹¹The widely respected historian of Hispanic Mexico, Charles Gibson, writes of the Aztec economy: "Indeed, few areas of the whole of America were so richly supplied with non-agricultural food resources as the Valley of Mexico, and the native diet in the colonial period continued to be extremely varied" (*The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, Stanford University Press, 1964, p. 337). Gibson goes on to describe and document this wealth in fishing, animal husbandry, salt, and hunting resources. He notes that the Spanish did not share the Aztec liking for most of the lakes' "nutritious foodstuffs" such as water bugs, grubs, and scum-cakes (p. 341).

Harris uses this same Western distaste as an argumentative device, making it appear that the common people were nutritionally deprived because they were "often reduced to eating the algae skimmed from the lake" (his p. 110). It is surprising to find anthropologists adopting this kind of argument; one had thought it had gone out of style with the discovery that the witchety grub of the Australian aboriginals was both tasty and healthy. On the native Aztec appreciation of the lakes' faunal life, including such a "delicacy" as *ezcahuilt*, a small red worm made into loaves, see also Durán's *History*, p. 64.

regarded as a reliable analyst in these matters, reports that the captives were "fattened like pigs": of food and drink, "they gave all to the captives"; and to "slaves destined for the sacrifices of the four-year cycle, "very dainty and luxurious foods." In a calculation of costs and benefits, we must also enter on the debit side all of their own blood the Aztecs had to spill, not only to take captives but as offerings from wounds they inflicted on themselves every day. On the debit side also were the fasts of days or weeks preparatory to sacrifice that specifically precluded eating meat.

It is clear from the best books kept on these transactions, Sahagún's records of merchants' feasts of the fifteenth solar month, that the Aztecs were not in the sacrifice business for their health. Each merchant killed one to four slaves, bought at market at a cost of thirty to forty capes apiece—depending on perfection of appearance and how well the slaves could sing. But during the course of the four or five feasts preliminary to the hurried sacrificial meal, the merchants would give away 800-1,200 capes



as well as other costly presents. They slaughtered at least eighty to one hundred turkeys and twenty to forty dogs, surely more meat than the limbs of one to four slaves. They built houses for the dances of the victims and supplied rich ceremonial paraphernalia, etc. So great were the expenses, according to Father Motolinia, that some merchants had to sell themselves into slavery, thus proving that business is dog eat dog wherever you go. As for the final return, Sahagún describes it as a little bit of meat per serving:

They cooked him in an *olla*. Separately, in an *olla*, they cooked the grains of maize. They served [his flesh] on it. They placed only a little on top of it. No chili did they add to it; they only sprinkled salt on it.¹²

As Harris himself tells us in the end—in the last paragraph of his account—there really could be no significant human meat supply per capita. If we estimate a population of one to two millions in the Valley, and an annual slaughter of 15,000 head—with a large

¹²Sahagún, Book IX, p. 67. Prescott writes of feasts that included human flesh: "This was not the coarse repast of famished cannibals, but a banquet teeming with delicious beverages and delicate viands, prepared with art and attended by both sexes, who... conducted themselves with all the decorum of civilized life" (*History of the Conquest of Mexico*, Philadelphia, 1891; Vol. I, p. 96).

wastage in trunks—the meat would come to substantially less than one pound per person per year. It is at this point that Harris decides to recalculate the whole sacrificial enterprise according to its political benefits; he speculates that the protein was being distributed to the important nobility and soldiers during lean periods of the food cycle. This desperate attempt to stave off the bankruptcy of the position has little to recommend it, since it is well documented that the privileged classes of the city had ready access to meat—not to mention the 1,000-2,000 nobility and retainers. Moctezuma daily entertained with rich spreads—so these people would have been the last to suffer anyhow.

It is logical that Harris's theory should also deal with the Christian Eucharist. His hypothesis here is not exactly the same, for the people of the Old World had domestic animals and could eat actual lambs—they didn't need to become cannibals. The resemblance to the protein theory of Aztec sacrifice consists in the common premise that nothing is present to the mind that does not first appeal to the stomach. So the symbolic consumption of the body and blood of Christ is said to be the historical trace of some real feasts the ancient Israelite chiefs and priests used to throw. These feasts had a pretext of animal sacrifice, but their effective value lay in the political credits the powers-that-be were able to build up by the generous redistribution of the food offerings.

It was easy to assimilate Jesus' death to the sacrificial aspect of such feasts, since the crucifixion occurred during Passover. The "paschal lamb" slain and eaten at Passover could be converted into a symbolic representation of Jesus. However, the early church, after some attempt to maintain tradition in the form of the love feast or *agape*, ultimately had to cancel the actual feasting because of growing population densities and food shortages. A abandoning its unwanted role as a "soup kitchen," the Church made do with the token distributions of wafer and wine in the communion service. It was more economical to offer just the semblance of food, the deprivation of the participants apparently being made up by other stuff they were being fed. Harris writes:

By spiritualizing the eating of the paschal lamb and by reducing its substance to a nutritionally worthless wafer, Christianity long ago unburdened itself of the responsibility of seeing to it that those who came to the feast did not go home on an empty stomach.... Before we congratulate Christianity for its transcendence of animal sacrifice, we should note that corporeal protein supplies were also being transposed by a rapidly expanding population.

In sum, everything happens as if the Eucharist were a gigantic and historic Pavlovian experiment, in which the tinkling of the communion bell evokes in the faithful the response to good feeds gone by.¹²

¹²The Eucharist, of course, evolved from the Judaic *berakah* or blessing over the bread and the blessing of the wine that *ritually* punctuated the Last Supper. For its part, the latter was the customary gathering of a small religious brotherhood within the congregation. In early Christianity the blessings, suitably transposed into one or another sacri-

II

The previous works of Mr. Harris include some of the liveliest anthropology of the last decade, beginning with *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, a true history of materialist wisdom and idealist folly in thinking about culture. More recently he wrote the semipopular *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches*, an entertaining attempt to make out as really practical some of the famously bizarre customs of mankind. The good sense of these exotic customs was often illustrated by the irrationalities of our own, so that in a world of disguised pragmatists only we seemed mysterious. *Cannibals and Kings* repeats a good part of this material, but it is cast now as part of a prophecy of an impending ecological doom, making the book suitable for even more general consumption.

What is truly at stake in these works is whether human culture is meaningful in its own right. Do people's customs and categories, curious as they seem, essentially contain information and programs about the practical state of the world? Or do people employ customs and categories to organize their lives within local schemes of interpretation, thus giving uses to material circumstances which, cultural comparison will show, are never the only ones possible? No, for Harris such a distinction as the one between clean and unclean animals in Leviticus could not be ecologically arbitrary. The taboos on various species must represent the real costs of getting them for food. "If anything, the whole pattern seems to be one of banning inconvenient or expensive sources of meat." We are reminded that water dwellers without fins or scales are "unlikely to be encountered in significant numbers on the edge of the Sinai Desert or in the Judean hills." (But are we to suppose, then, that water dwellers with fins are in the desert?)

Harris's doctrine is that the values men live by are disguised (e.g., spiritualized) forms of natural constraints. They are the names we apply to the objective distinctions set up by natural selection. Culture thus becomes a representation, in the form of talk, of the way we must segment and conceive the world in order to adapt effectively to it. What has been said of Kautsky is applicable to Harris, that for him "human history is an appendage of natural history, its laws of motion merely forms of appearance of biological laws." That there is no evident sense to much of human history or culture poses problems for this viewpoint. To represent Nature in the guise of symbols seems like a wasteful mystification. Certain however that men's categories refer eventually to their "real" experiences, as guided by their zoological interests,

which, were separated from the common meal (*agape*), which for a time was a distinct part of the church service. The meal was abolished in some places because it took on bacchanalian qualities. In any event, the abolition could constitute no savings to the Church, which itself undertook no expense, since the food was brought by the participants to the meal (see, for example, Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1945).

¹³There is a growing semiological literature within anthropology on the nature of taboo, including several important analyses of the Leviticus prohibitions by Mary Douglas. See her *Purity and Danger* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

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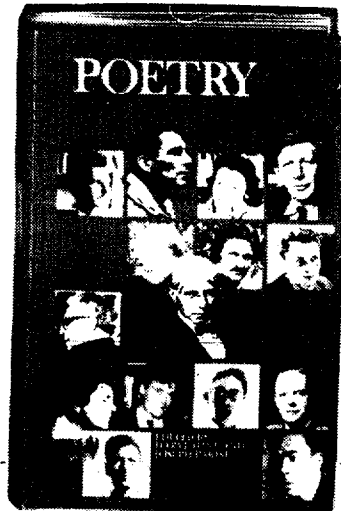
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POCKET BOOKS

Harris can be sure that no working culture is a mistake. It simply offers to Western Science the challenge of finding the secret material wisdom in the outwardly peculiar custom, including the adaptive benefits that must be involved in the very process of symbolic camouflage. Harris calls this naturalistic resolution of meaning "cultural determinism."

By "determinism" Harris means an analysis of culture along the lines of positive and empirical science, as counterposed to the vagaries of free will and moral idealism. Nevertheless, as Harris actually uses it, the idea that social customs represent a hidden economic calculus is a highly sentimental concept. Rather than being empirical, it demands a heroic disregard of the appearances in favor of a theory of the realities. Gradually the reader becomes aware that Harris will make no actual study of the material costs and benefits for any of the customs he so explains. He does cite evidence. But anthropology is already famous for its evidence of everything—and its opposite. Harris appeals to the evidence for testimony rather

lowers the population's reproductive capacity.

The apparent illogic of holding down the manpower of one's own group while fighting wars does not seem to disturb Harris; he is intent on the higher rationality of his hypothesis, which offers no less than an explanation of the condition of women in human society. Like many other ideas of the book, the theory is notable also for its attempt to account for the origins of a phenomenon by a property that is not characteristic of the phenomenon as we know it. It is as if everything were economically sensible once upon a time, in its original dietary taboos, the Eucharist, female inferiority—but then the custom became indifferent or hostile to reason and just went on and on. Perhaps that is why some of Harris's arguments follow a similar course. Complex enough to begin with, his theory of male superiority begins to take on Ptolemaic convolutions as it is forced to account for the absence of any necessary relation in the cultures we know between the intensity of warfare and the inferiority of women, or between female infanticide and population density, or population



than to test his hypotheses. The evidence then falls evenly on all his hypotheses and speculations, the logical and the illogical alike.

Harris argues that the pressure of population on economic resources, resulting from "genetically mandated" heterosexual activity, has up to now (the "Contraceptive era") been the decisive problem of human history. The book relies heavily on this neo-Malthusian proposition. Major human institutions—warfare, male superiority, the state—are said to develop as means for coping with an "irresistible reproductive pressure." The pressure itself may act in some dialectic relation to technological growth, i.e., the increase in population may be set-off by more intense production; or vice versa; but the density of population in any event will tend to increase to a point where it threatens livelihood and environment. Economic good sense will then compel some appropriate cultural response. So warfare is alleged to have evolved along with agriculture, say between 10,000 and 8000 BC, in order to keep population density within ecological reason. It did so 1) by forcing communities to put greater distances between themselves; 2) by bestowing uniquely superior values on males and masculinity. The inferior status of women then helped to facilitate female infanticide, which in turn

stability, or between various combinations of these.

But there were already problems with the hypothesis in its simplest form. According to Harris, casualties in warfare have no direct effect on a group's reproductive capacity, since the surviving men could easily service the surplus women. (Notice, incidentally, how all these arguments make a point biologically or demographically on the condition that they presuppose the absence of a social system.) On the one hand, then, it is difficult to credit Harris's point that warfare keeps down population density by creating relatively unused space between warring settlements, and that it is thus a response to demographic increases accompanying the development of agriculture. No man's-lands between villages may make for good hunting, but agriculture, which is typically more productive, cannot take place within them. At the same time, by Harris's own argument, military losses will not check population growth. Hence warfare in this respect, by reducing the land base, merely increases the ratios of people-to-land, i.e., the population pressure.

On the other hand, since male casualties have no limiting demographic effect, one wonders why women were not allowed to fight and risk their reproduc-

tive capacities directly, instead of being submitted to male chauvinism in order to promote the neglect of female children. It is a reasonable question, Harris allows, since the javelin records of the Women's Olympics indicate that ladies could do real harm. But that's exactly the problem, he says. They might kill some men, which would jeopardize the superiority of males, and therewith the possibility of controlling population growth through female infanticide.

Satisfied with this "cultural" determination of the origins of war, Harris reasons that it is unnecessary to account for social conflict by some "inherent" tendency in human nature. Harris has been an important critic of sociobiology, and this argument is typical of his disagreements with that viewpoint. How can a constant inclination toward aggression, he asks, account for what history shows to be a variable disposition to kill? Perhaps, the sociobiologist might reply, in the same way as a "genetically mandated" heterosexuality, which we all know to be intermittent in expression, is supposed by Harris's theory to account for the origin of institutions. We can, sociobiologists claim, detect the presence of a biological cause by the efforts that are taken to suppress it, even as we know it to be irresistible by its periodic eruptions into social life, despite all these best efforts.

The contradiction in Harris's "cultural determinism" is that sex is considered *a priori* as a biological fact, characterized as an urge of human nature independent of the relations between social persons. There is then no escape from the sociobiological reduction. The conclusion already exists in Harris's premise that sexuality and reproduction are not social facts but considerations of another kind, acting upon society from without (or below). The truly anthropological approach is to comprehend heterosexual activity as it uniquely exists among human beings, for whom alone the process of "conception" is always a double entendre, since no satisfaction can occur without the act and the partners as socially defined and contemplated—i.e., according to a symbolic code of persons, practices, and proprieties. (We need not even go into the issue of sublimation.)

Harris, on the contrary, presupposes sex to be an abstract biological drive. This, taken with the generic physiological capacity of women to bear so many children over a lifetime, gives rise to a runaway reproductive pressure. When he then argues against the explanation of war by innate aggressiveness on the grounds that cultures actually vary in belligerence, Harris is recalling for aggression what he forgot about sex: that it always takes place within a relative cultural scheme, from which follow the observed patterns and intensities of the practices.

Mr. Harris makes a considerable point of the toughmindedness and scientism of his anthropology. But his theory is really no more deterministic than it is cultural. When he discusses the points in history when population endangers resources, a symptomatic ambiguity appears regarding what kinds of adaptation societies make to such demographic crises. Here his analysis concludes that some people will then intensify production (as by irrigation in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica), while others try to stabilize population (as by female infanticide among tribal agriculturalists). But Harris does not indicate any

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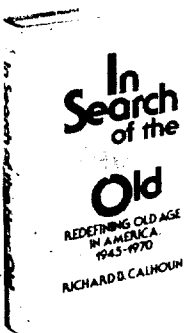
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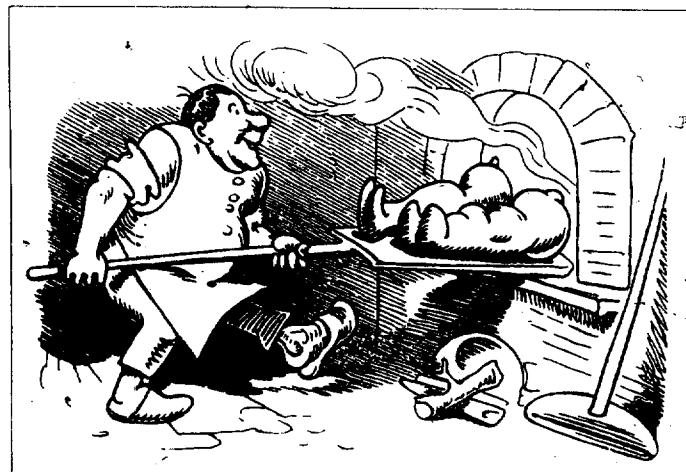
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theoretical curiosity about these or other radically different adaptive strategies. For societies with internally opposed interests, as between antagonistic social classes, he does not make clear whether it is some part or the whole of society that adapts effectively. In India, the lower classes are served by the preservation of sacred cows. Among the Aztecs, the upper classes benefit from the cult of human sacrifice. But when each of a regional set of warring neolithic communities kills its female infants, it is the set as a whole that stands to gain. The problem is not merely that the explanations are ad hoc. It is that in all these conditions, any given material rationality will be, from some other social viewpoint, irrational.

The issue disappears for Harris because he considers "the population" to be a quantity rather than a society, consisting of organisms with biological requirements rather than people with cultural interests. It is enough to explain a custom if it can be shown that it yields some kind of practical benefits in some way to someone. "Materialism" becomes a kind of academic parlor game, whose appeal perhaps owes something to the simplicity of the rules: any sort of

system that encourages the multiplication of poor people? On the other hand, the protein benefits of Aztec sacrifice go exclusively to the privileged classes, denying these indispensable nutrients to the poor. Then again, warring tribesmen in South America and elsewhere are said by Harris to go to some cultural lengths to hold down the regional population by female infanticide. Each group thus deprives itself of the strategic advantage in favor of some politically nonexistent whole that includes its own competitors. Anything goes.

So too, in his chapter on the Yanomamo of Brazil, who engage in intensive warfare although not under evident population pressure, and whose population increases where the rate of female infanticide is highest, Harris surmises that the Yanomamo must be responding to (what else?) scarce protein resources. He then takes note of certain studies indicating the absence of clinical symptoms of protein deficiency in the region. But this cannot be negative evidence—it is consistent with the contention that the Yanomamo have adjusted to a scarcity of proteins. As Harris writes in a comparable discussion of the Maya: "On



economic value that can plausibly be suggested for any cultural practice scores points—regardless of whether the same custom entails economic penalties or irrationalities in some other sector of the social order.

Harris is well known for his "cultural-materialist" explanation of the Hindu sacred cow, repeated in this book, to the effect that the taboos against maltreating cows permit the masses of impoverished farmers to raise the bullocks they need for farming. Otherwise, if allowed to eat meat, people might be tempted to destroy their breeding stock. Hence the taboo on cows was a spiritualized statement of the hard economic calculations of millions upon millions of poor farmers. But all this looks like the material "maximization" Harris claims for it only if one implicitly acquiesces in taking the Indian property laws for granted. As he indicates in another book, the ratio of people to land in India is such that 43 percent of the cattle are raised by farmers who own 5 percent of the pasture.¹⁵

One could just as reasonably argue that the taboo on cattle is a way of maximizing the number of poor people. (And just what is the rationality of a

theoretical grounds, the picture of what must have happened seems clear."

"It is a ubiquitous statement presented as rational or scientific shows itself unjustified as such," Louis Dumont has recently written, "there is a strong chance that it was imposed by another type of consistency and can be identified as one outcrop, as it were, of the underlying ideological network."¹⁶ For "cultural determinism" we can, as I've said, identify the underlying ideology as the Western business mentality. Applied to the explanation of Aztec cannibalism or Hindu taboos, Harris's utilitarianism incorporates the meanings other people give their lives within the kind of material rationalizations we give to our own.

Sartre appropriately called a similar intellectual procedure "terror," for its inflexible refusal to discriminate, its goal of "total assimilation at the least possible effort." Sartre was referring to the "vulgar Marxism" which could only see in an act of politics or a poem of Valéry's some version of "bourgeois idealism." Everything in the social superstructure could be reduced to its economic function. Similarly, in *Can-*

¹⁵Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* (Random House, 1974), p. 27.

¹⁶Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx* (University of Chicago Press, 1977)—a book that has a lot that is valuable to say about the kind of ideology inscribed in *Cannibals and Kings*.

nibals, and Kings, the social fact is dispersed with as a mere appearance whose truth lies elsewhere, in some material value. As Sartre said, it looks like an exercise of getting down to basics—in this instance, to the necessary conditions of protein requirements or the survival of the population. But such deter-

minations are only seemingly basic. In reality they are abstract, and devoid of social content. Once we characterize meaningful human practices in these ideological terms, we shall have to give up all anthropology, because in the translation everything cultural has been allowed to escape. □

LETTERS

BOGGLED

To the Editors:

Stanley Hoffmann's article, "Who Can Salvage Peace?" (NYR, August 17) rests on four errors: (1) that Israel has been reluctant or unwilling to make peace in accordance with Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, especially with regard to the West Bank; (2) that (at the time Hoffmann wrote, at least) Sadat and other Arab leaders were willing to make peace in accordance with those Resolutions; (3) that Israel is seeking political control over "Arab lands"; and (4) that the United States missed an opportunity for peace in July, 1972, when Sadat purported to expel Soviet advisers from Egypt.

While often repeated, these propositions have no basis in fact.

Resolutions 242 and 338 require the parties to make peace by direct negotiations. Their agreements of peace should rest on two basic principles: Israel need not withdraw from any territories it occupied in 1967 until peace is made; and the new "secure and recognized" boundaries of Israel need not be the same as the Armistice Demarcation Lines of 1949.

I can testify from personal experience and subsequent study that Israel has cooperated in all the (many, many) efforts since 1967 to carry out Resolution 242. Until Camp David, all peace making efforts have foundered on the flat refusal of the Arab States to make peace in accordance with the Resolution. Even Egypt accepted only one-half the Resolution during Sadat's trip to Jerusalem; the other Arab States continue to reject both halves. Sadat's agreement at Camp David to make peace in three months, on the basis of a formula for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip which accepts the possible partition of those territories between Israel and Jordan, is a completely new development and a most constructive one. A reader would be hard pressed to appreciate the significance of this fact from Mr. Hoffmann's article.

The most important reasons for the territorial provision of Resolution 242, which Sadat has just accepted in principle, is that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are not "Arab" lands, but unallocated parts of the Palestine Mandate, a "sacred trust" like Namibia, to be fulfilled in accordance with its terms. Professor Hoffmann refers to the West Bank as "Jordanian territory." This is not the case. Jordan's attempt to annex the territory in 1951 was ineffective because it was not widely recognized by the world community, and especially by the other Arab states.

As Sadat has repeatedly made clear, his "expulsion" of some Soviet advisers from Egypt in July, 1972, was part of the Soviet-Egyptian deception plan in preparation for the War of October, 1973, on which the Soviets and the Egyptians had agreed in April, 1972.

Professor Hoffmann's extraordinary comparison between France in the Thirties and Israel today is in a different category. It rests not only on factual error, but on errors of judgment. Hoffmann seems to believe that in 1935-1936 France could have prevented World War II by making a political agreement with Hitler. This is a fantasy. Surely Laval went "the extra mile" in his quest for agreement with Hitler. It is hard to imagine any concessions Britain and France could have made to Hitler beyond those they did make: the acceptance of German rearmament and the militarization of the Rhineland; and our non-intervention in Spain. The allies

could have prevented the war not by more appeasement, but by occupying the Rhineland, by British conscription, and by a clear deterrent political policy, perhaps in association with the Soviet Union.

Mr. Hoffmann's advice to Israel—that Israel should follow the course he thinks France should have followed when Hitler first came to power—simply boggles the imagination.

The agreements reached at Camp David contradict Mr. Hoffmann's analysis in every particular. But his views are influential, and they continue to be heard and read.

Eugene V. Rostow*

Yale University Law School
New Haven, Connecticut

*While in the State Department, 1966-1969, I was in charge of the process which led to Resolution 242.

Stanley Hoffmann replies:

Mr. Eugene Rostow's reading of past Israeli policy, of Egyptian policy in 1972, of the Camp David documents, and of what Sadat agreed to at Camp David, is as bizarre as his reading of my comparison between France in the Thirties and Israel.

The future will, I think, make it clear that no Arab state, including Egypt, wants a "partition" of the West Bank between Israel and Jordan, or accepts the idea that the West Bank and Gaza are not Arab lands.

As for my comparison, its only point was to show that in both cases, hard-pressed people mistakenly underestimated the costs of the course they preferred (appeasement in France's case, continuing control of Arab lands in Israel's) and overestimated the risks of a different course (resistance to Hitler in the Thirties, self-determination for the Palestinians today).

How Mr. Rostow could have misinterpreted my meaning is what boggles my imagination.

I do not believe that the Camp David agreements contradict my analysis. Obviously, it was Carter's participation and pressure which wrested from Begin a number of significant concessions that go beyond the Begin plan of last December and that the Israeli government had refused to make before. It is also clear that only if the United States, in the months to come, interprets the ambiguous and controversial statements of Camp David in a way that satisfies the Arab states and the Palestinians, will there be a chance for real peace in the whole area.

IN LOCO PARENTIS

To the Editors:

I would like to point out a certain crucial theme in Ned O'Gorman's *The Children Are Dying*, which Robert Coles failed to elaborate in his review of that book (NYR, September 28), and which seems to me to be essential to O'Gorman's work in Harlem.

The entire book hinges on the matter of educating the oppressed. If we define political oppression as the denial of political rights to certain classes of people, then the young citizens of Harlem are doubly oppressed: firstly as children, secondly, as black children. O'Gorman, above all, wishes to extend the sphere of rights to the child. These rights range from the satisfaction of basic biological needs to the civil and political. But what turns out to be a critical point for O'Gorman—and one which becomes his most radical statement—is the establishment of the child's rights within the family. This means

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