



CHAPTER TWO

Culture

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ANTHROPOLOGY AND AMERICAN POP CULTURE

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“UNITED WE STAND”

Semester after semester, by the second week of class, at least one “white” student will exclaim, “I didn’t know I had a culture!” Many Americans are surprised (and pleased) to learn that, among all the foreign and ethnic cultures that surround them, there is one culture they may claim as their own.

American culture is built on unity and diversity. Historically, the United States has been represented as a nation of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs)—people of northern European extraction, with mostly English, but also Scottish and Welsh, ancestry. This depiction of American society has never been accurate. The boundaries of the United States have always included Native Americans (called First Nations in Canada), soon to be joined by Africans and Asians. Since its exploration by Europeans began, North America has included Spanish and French, as well as English, speakers. Today, migrants from many countries, along with the descendants of various immigrant groups, occupy North American soil. All contemporary Americans, to some extent, regardless of their national origin or ancestry (often mixed), participate in a common culture (patterned ways of behaving and thinking).

Cultural unity in American society is depicted in traditions, customs, and rituals, including Thanksgiving dinner and Valentine’s Day, graduation ceremonies and bridal showers, serial monogamy, and the Super Bowl.

Americans, as a society, invent new traditions and core values that reflect social transformations. *Environmentalism* is exemplified by recycling. A concern for public health translates into safe sex and fitness programs. Other prevalent patterns in American culture include peer influence, fictive kin ties (close relationships between unrelated persons that mimic biological kinship), and living among and with strangers. Because work is the key organizing condition of our social life, we spend most hours of our day with people we don't love and, worse yet, often with people we don't like! Millions of American children are reared in child care centers and by "blended families." Retirement communities house adults who have become peripheral to the labor force and to the family. Support groups, through which Americans acquire comfort and a sense of belonging, have risen in association with numerous disorders, illnesses, and tragedies. Psychotherapists and other helping professionals, also known as "formal support systems," have become the best friends money can buy. What other examples can you think of that support the argument that Americans in fact are, and have, a culture?

The multicultural movement has brought a new consciousness to North Americans, who now see culture as an equal opportunity good—something all people possess. In this view, an Italian festival in New York's Little Italy is as much a signifier of culture as is *Carmen* at the opera house. Going to a concert by Gypsy Kings is as much a cultural experience as is attending Sartre's play *No Exit*. A Gay Pride celebration in Atlanta may rival Chicago's St. Patrick's Day Parade in media attention. Literature on women's culture occupies its own wall in bookstores. The disabled, as a social category, are distinguished by their abilities. To be sure, ranking of cultures persists. However, the realization that all people, including nonethnic Americans, have culture, has never been stronger.

Integral to contemporary American mass culture is human diversity. To be mainstream today increasingly means to be multicultural—exposed to and tolerant of, if not active in, a myriad of customs, traditions, and rituals. Appropriation by Americans of symbols, styles, and artifacts external to their national origins is common. Our public and private lives are permeated by forces and influences that may have little to do with our ancestral cultures, and everything to do with a common experience at a particular moment in history. A struggle, crisis, tragedy, or threat mobilizes people to unite, organize, and fight as one, transcending their differences to protect their common, human rights. At no time in recent American history was this process more evident than in fall 2001, following the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States.

Patriotism among Americans, across lines of race, ethnicity, class, age, region, and religion, arose instantaneously to counter what millions of Americans perceived as a threat to the very core of their society. There was a powerful resurgence of nationalism among citizens of the United States. The historic national ideal "Out of Many, One," in the face of threats seen by Americans as potential *ethnocide*, became reality. According to "America's Mayor," Rudolph W. Giuliani (2001),

We know that this was not just an attack on the City of New York or the United States of America. It was an attack on the very idea of a free, inclusive and civil society. The victims were of every race, religion and ethnicity, representing 80 different nations. Americans are not a single ethnic group. Americans are not of one race or one religion. We are defined as Americans by our belief in political, economic, and religious freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human life.

A self-conscious, collective expression of a common culture by a people is readily and invariably depicted in symbols. Visual markers of culture serve to construct a distinct identity, and to erect and maintain boundaries of exclusion. Artifacts, words, colors, and accessories, which people imbue with meaning, validate and strengthen a sense of peoplehood. In what ways did Americans visually express their national unity following the terrorist attacks? Pause for a moment and reflect on the landscape that surrounds you. What signs, or messages of an American culture abound as never before, and demand your attention?

Whatever the sentiments, interpretations, and uses of the American flag have been historically, this symbol of American identity was embraced, adopted, and displayed by more citizens after September 11, 2001, than ever before. At the time of this writing (February 2002), neighborhoods are still dotted by stars and stripes. Red, white, and blue, the color scheme in vogue, decorate malls, human service organizations, businesses, schools, parks,



Selling American flags in New York's Chinatown after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on America. What kinds of symbols do you see in the photo? What do they stand for?

and shops across rural, suburban, and urban America. Bumper stickers, scarves, hats, T-shirts, and jewelry that boast the American flag constitute a cultural commodity affordable by all and profitable for some. The colorful, lighted sign “Support Our President” welcomes patrons of an XXX-rated adult club in downtown Atlanta.

What is our take-home lesson from the tragedy that paralyzed America, and from the ways in which Americans joined as one people to grieve their loss and respond to this threat to their collective well-being? Danger begets action. Just as a personal tragedy may turn into a political crusade, the threat of genocide or ethnocide may generate nationalism and ethnocentrism. Historically, victimized populations, such as Gypsies the world over, Jews and Armenians in Europe, and Native Americans and African Americans in the United States, have responded to such threats by constructing and strengthening an inclusive in-group or nation. Social solidarity is adaptive for groups threatened by discrimination, oppression, or extinction on the basis of their cultural orientation.

As you read the rest of the book, you will understand the powerful role that culture, an adaptive capacity among humans, plays in biological survival, social reproduction, and political integrity. The proliferation of nationalism in the world, and multiculturalism, in the form of culturally defined affinity groups, in the United States and Canada is, at the core, an adaptation to death and an expression of life. Americans’ solitary response to terrorism parallels the responses by minorities in our society to the groups and circumstances that threaten them. Any self-conscious collectivity, by mobilizing, uniting, and fighting for their human rights, expresses their humanity and their agency in a society that prides itself on being “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” ☺

CULTURE AND ITS ASPECTS

Human beings share society (organized life in groups) with other animals. Culture, however, is distinctly human. The term **culture** refers to a way of life—traditions and customs—transmitted through learning, which play a vital role in molding the beliefs and behavior of the people exposed to them. Children learn these traditions by growing up in a society, through a process called *enculturation*. Cultures include customs and opinions, developed over the generations, about proper and improper behavior. Cultural traditions answer such questions as: How do we do things? How do we make sense of the world? How do we tell right from wrong? A culture tends to produce consistencies in behavior and thought among people who live in the same society.

A critical feature of culture is its transmission through learning. For hundreds of thousands of years, humans have had at least some of the biological capacities on which culture depends. These abilities are to learn, to think symbolically, to use language, and to use tools and other cultural means of organizing their lives and adapting to their environments.

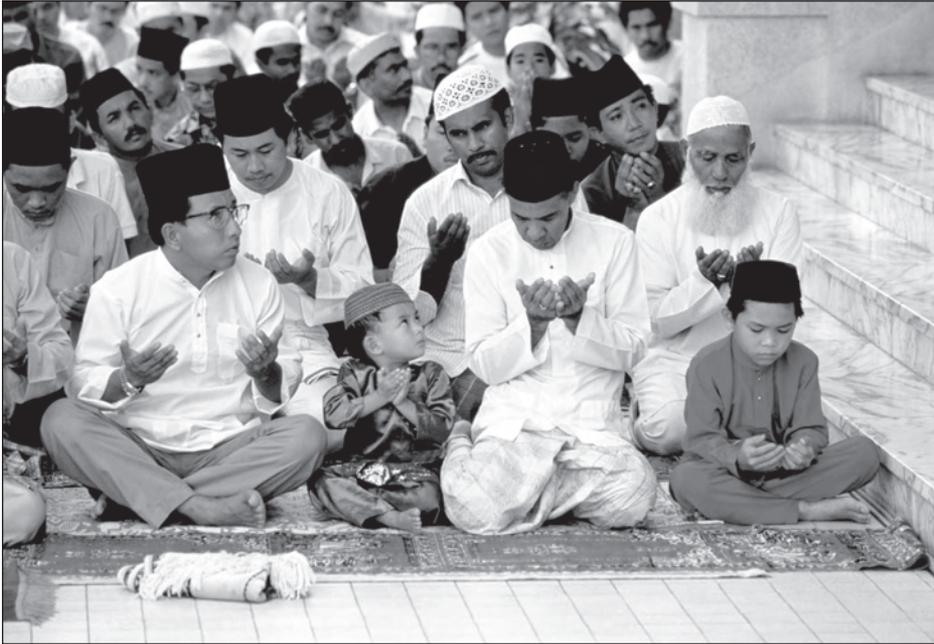
The concept of culture has long been basic to *anthropology* (the study of human biological and cultural diversity in time and space). More than a century ago, in his classic book *Primitive Culture*, the British anthropologist Edward Tylor gave a definition of culture that is still more widely quoted than any other: “Culture . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871/1958, p. 1). The key words here are “acquired . . . as a member of society.” Tylor’s definition points to beliefs and behavior that humans obtain not through biological heredity but by growing up in a particular society. As they grow up they are exposed to a specific cultural tradition. **Enculturation** is the process by which a child learns his or her culture.

Culture Is Learned Each of us grows up in the presence of a set of rules and expectations transmitted across the generations. The ease with which children absorb any cultural tradition reflects the unique human capacity to learn. Cultural traditions, or more simply, cultures, are transmitted through learning and language. Each infant begins immediately, through learning and interaction with others, to incorporate a cultural tradition. Sometimes culture is taught directly, as when parents tell kids, “Say thank you” or “Don’t talk to strangers.” Culture is also learned through observation, as children pay attention to what goes on around them. Children may change their behavior because other people tell them to do so. They also learn from experience—by seeing examples of what their culture considers right and wrong and of what happens to people who violate norms.

Culture is also absorbed unconsciously. Consider how we internalize norms about how far apart people should stand when they talk. No one ever instructs us to maintain a specific distance when we speak to someone. Instead people learn their culture’s idea of proper “social spacing” through a gradual process of observation, experience, and conscious and unconscious behavior modification. No one tells Latin Americans to stand closer together than North Americans do, but they learn to do so anyway as part of their cultural tradition.

Culture Is Shared Culture is transmitted in society and across generations. We learn a culture by watching, listening and talking to, learning from, and being with other people. Individual members of a given culture share many memories, beliefs, values, expectations, and ways of thinking and acting. Enculturation unifies people by providing them with common experiences and knowledge.

Adults become agents in the enculturation of their children, just as their parents were for them. Culture constantly changes, but certain beliefs, values, and child-rearing practices persist. Consider a simple American example of enduring shared enculturation. As children, when we didn’t finish a meal, our parents reminded us of starving children in some foreign country. A generation earlier, our grandparents probably said something similar to



Muslim men and boys worship in a mosque in Brunei, located in the northwest of the island of Borneo. What aspects of culture are illustrated?

our parents' pronouncement. The specific country changes (China, India, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Somalia). Still, American enculturators go on suggesting that by eating all our brussels sprouts, broccoli, or spinach we can justify our own good fortune, compared to a hungry foreign child.

Despite the American value of individualism—including the belief that people should make up their own mind and have a right to their opinion—little of what we think is original or unique. Because of enculturation, we share our opinions and beliefs with many other people. Illustrating the power of a shared cultural background, we are most likely to feel comfortable with people from our own culture. **Culture shock** refers to disturbed feelings that often arise when one has contact with an unfamiliar culture, either in North America or, more usually, abroad. It is a feeling of alienation, of being without some of the most ordinary and basic cues of one's culture of origin. Usually culture shock passes if one stays in the new culture long enough.

Culture Is Symbolic Cultural learning is based on the unique human capacity to use symbols (signs that have no necessary or natural connection to the things they stand for). During enculturation, people gradually internalize a system of meanings and symbols that are part of their culture. Symbolic thought is crucial to humans and to culture. The anthropologist Leslie White saw culture as:

dependent upon symboling. . . . Culture consists of tools, implements, utensils, clothing, ornaments, customs, institutions, beliefs, rituals, games, works of art, language, etc. (White 1959, p. 3)

For White, culture originated when our ancestors acquired the ability to use symbols:

freely and arbitrarily to originate and bestow meaning upon a thing or event, and, correspondingly, . . . to grasp and appreciate such meaning. (White 1959, p. 3)

A **symbol** is something verbal or nonverbal, in a language or culture, that comes to stand for something else. There is no obvious, natural, or necessary connection between the symbol and that which it symbolizes. A pet that barks is no more naturally a *dog* than a *chien*, *Hund*, or *mbwa*, to use the words in French, German, and Swahili for the animal we call “dog.” Language, which makes symbolic thought possible, is a distinctive possession of human beings.

Symbols may also be nonverbal. Flags can stand for countries; and arches, for hamburger chains. Holy water is an important symbol for Roman Catholics. As is true of all symbols, the link between the symbol (water) and what is symbolized (holiness) is arbitrary. In itself water is not holier than milk, blood, or other natural liquids. Nor does holy water differ chemically from ordinary water. Holy water is a symbol within Roman Catholicism, which is an international cultural system. A natural thing has come to have a special meaning for Catholics. People who are enculturated in Catholicism (raised as Catholics) share common beliefs passed on through learning across the generations.

All human societies use symbols to create and maintain culture. The animals that are most closely related to us—chimpanzees and gorillas—have rudimentary precultural abilities. But no other animal has elaborated cultural abilities—to learn, to communicate, and to store, process, and use information—to the extent that humans have.

Culture and Nature Culture takes the natural biological urges we share with other animals and teaches us how to express them in particular ways. People have to eat, but culture teaches us what, when, and how. In many cultures people have their main meal at noon, but most North Americans prefer a large dinner. English people eat fish for breakfast, but North Americans prefer hot cakes and cold cereals. Brazilians put hot milk into strong coffee, whereas North Americans pour cold milk into a weaker brew. Midwesterners dine at 5 or 6 P.M., Spaniards at 10 P.M.

Cultural habits, perceptions, and inventions mold “human nature” in many directions. All people have to eliminate wastes from their bodies, but some cultures teach people to defecate standing, while others tell them to do it sitting down. A generation ago, in Paris and other French cities, it was customary for men to urinate almost publicly, and seemingly without embarrassment, in barely shielded outdoor *pissoirs*. Our “bathroom” habits,

including waste elimination, bathing, and dental care, are parts of cultural traditions that have converted natural acts into cultural customs.

Our culture—and cultural changes—affect the ways in which we perceive nature, human nature, and the “natural.” Through science, invention, and discovery, cultural advances have overcome many “natural” limitations. We prevent and cure diseases like polio and smallpox, which felled our ancestors. We use Viagra to restore sexual potency. Through cloning, scientists have altered the way we think about biological identity and the meaning of life itself. Culture, of course, has not freed us from natural threats. Hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and other natural forces regularly challenge our wishes to modify the environment through building, development, and expansion. Can you think of other ways in which nature strikes back at people and their products?

Culture Is All-Encompassing All people have culture, and culture is all-encompassing. Sometimes we hear someone described as “a cultured person,” but all humans have culture in the anthropological sense. Culture includes much more than elite education, taste, refinement, sophistication, and appreciation of the fine arts. All people are cultured, not only artists and college graduates. The most significant cultural forces are those that affect us every day of our lives, especially those that influence children during enculturation. Culture encompasses experience that is sometimes regarded as trivial, such as exposure to popular culture. To understand contemporary North American culture, we must consider the importance of television, fast food, and sports. A rock star can be as significant as a symphony conductor, or more; a comic book, as relevant as a book-award winner.

Culture Is Integrated Cultures are not haphazard collections of customs and beliefs but integrated, patterned systems. A **culture trait** is an individual item in a culture, such as a particular belief, tool, or practice. A **culture pattern** is a coherent set of interrelated traits. Many customs, institutions, and values form patterns. That is, they are connected and interrelated, so that if one changes, the others also change. During the 1950s, for example, the pattern was for most American women to have domestic careers as homemakers and mothers. Now it is assumed that women will get jobs outside the home. Related attitudes toward marriage, family, and children have also changed. The new pattern includes a later age at marriage, alternative child care systems, and more frequent divorce.

Cultures are integrated by their main economic activities and social patterns. They are also integrated by enduring themes, values, and attitudes. Cultures train their individual members to share certain personality traits. A set of **core values** (key, basic, or central values) integrates each culture and helps distinguish it from others. For instance, the work ethic, individualism, achievement, and self-reliance are core values that have integrated American culture for generations. Different sets of values are found as patterns in other cultures.

People Use Culture Actively Although cultural rules tell us what to do and how to do it, people don't always do what the rules say should be done. People use their culture actively and creatively, rather than blindly following its dictates. We are not passive beings who are doomed to follow our cultural traditions like programmed robots. Instead, people can learn, interpret, and manipulate the same rule in different ways. Also, culture is contested. That is, different groups in society often struggle with one another over whose ideas, values, and beliefs will prevail. Even common symbols may have radically different *meanings* to different people and groups in the same culture. Golden arches may cause one person to salivate while another plots a vegetarian protest.

Even if they agree about what should and shouldn't be done, people don't always do as their culture directs or as other people expect. Many rules are violated, some very often (for example, automobile speed limits). Some anthropologists find it useful to distinguish between ideal and real culture. The *ideal culture* consists of what people say they should do and what they say they do. *Real culture* refers to their actual behavior as observed by the anthropologist.

Culture is both public and individual, both in the world and in people's minds. Anthropologists are interested not only in public and collective behavior but also in how *individuals* think, feel, and act. The individual and culture are linked because human social life is a process in which individuals internalize the meanings of *public* (i.e., cultural) messages. Then, alone and in groups, people influence culture by converting their private understandings into public expressions (D'Andrade 1984).

Culture Is Instrumental, Adaptive, and Maladaptive Culture is the main reason for human adaptability and success. Other animals rely on biological means of adaptation (such as fur or blubber, which are adaptations to cold). Humans also adapt biologically—for example, by shivering when we get cold or sweating when we get hot. But in addition to biological responses, people also have cultural ways of adapting. To cope with environmental stresses we habitually use technology, or tools. We hunt cold-adapted animals and use their fur coats as our own. We turn the thermostat up in the winter and down in the summer. Or we plan action to increase our comfort. We have a cold drink, jump in a pool, or travel to some place cooler in the summer or warmer in the winter. People use culture *instrumentally*, that is, to fulfill their basic biological needs for food, drink, shelter, comfort, and reproduction.

On one level, cultural traits (e.g., air conditioning) may be called *adaptive* if they help individuals cope with environmental stresses. But, on a different level, such traits can also be *maladaptive*. That is, they may threaten a group's continued existence. Thus chlorofluorocarbons from air conditioners deplete the ozone layer and, by doing so, can harm humans and other life. Many modern cultural patterns may be maladaptive in the long run. Some examples of maladaptive aspects of culture are policies that

encourage overpopulation, poor food-distribution systems, overconsumption, and industrial pollution of the environment.

There Are Levels of Culture Cultures can be larger or smaller than nations. We may distinguish between different levels of culture: international, national, and subcultural. **International culture** is the term for cultural traditions that extend beyond national boundaries. Many culture traits and patterns have become international in scope. They have spread through migration, colonization, and the expansion of multinational organizations (like the Catholic Church). Catholics in different countries share experiences, symbols, beliefs, and values transmitted by their church. Also illustrating international culture, the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia share certain traits as a result of a shared linguistic and cultural heritage from British founding fathers and mothers.

National culture refers to experiences, beliefs, customs, and values shared by people who have grown up in the same nation, such as the United States, Canada, or Mexico. Although people who live in the same society—a nation, for example—share a cultural tradition, cultures also have internal diversity, which is the focus of this book. Individuals, families, communities, regions, classes, and other groups within a culture have different learning experiences as well as shared ones. **Subcultures** are the diverse cultural patterns and traditions associated with subgroups in the same nation. Subcultures (a problematic term, as we shall see below and in Chapter 4) may originate in ethnicity, class, region, or religion. The religious backgrounds of American Baptists, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims create subcultural differences between them. Although they share the same national culture, northern and southern Americans differ in certain culture traits and patterns. This illustrates regional subcultures.

Nowadays, many anthropologists are reluctant to use the term *subculture*. They feel that the prefix “sub” is offensive because it means “below.” “Subcultures” may thus be perceived as “less than” or somehow inferior to a dominant, elite, or national culture. In this discussion of levels of culture, we intend no such implication. Our point is simply that nations may contain many different culturally defined groups. As mentioned earlier, culture is contested. Various groups strive to promote the correctness and value of their own practices, values, and beliefs in comparison with those of other groups, or the nation as a whole.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism **Ethnocentrism** is the tendency to use one’s own cultural standards and values to judge the behavior and beliefs of people with different cultures. Ethnocentrism is a cultural universal. That is, people everywhere think that familiar explanations, opinions, and customs are true, right, proper, and moral. They regard different behavior as strange or savage.

The opposite of ethnocentrism is **cultural relativism**, the view that behavior in one culture should not be judged by the standards of another. This position can also present problems. An extreme cultural relativist might

contend that there is no superior, international, or universal morality—that the moral and ethical rules of all cultures deserve equal respect. In the extreme relativist view, Nazi Germany is evaluated as impartially as Athenian Greece. Anthropologists respect human diversity, and most anthropologists try to be objective, accurate, and sensitive in their accounts of diverse cultures. However, objectivity and sensitivity do not mean that we have to ignore certain international standards of justice and morality.

Universality, Generality, and Particularity Anthropologists agree that learning is uniquely developed among humans, that culture is the main reason for the success of our species (*Homo sapiens*), and that any normal child can learn any cultural tradition through enculturation. Regardless of their genes, ancestry, or physical appearance, people can learn any culture. This point is illustrated by the fact that the ancestors of modern Americans and Canadians came to North America from different countries and continents, representing hundreds of different nations, cultures, and languages. However, the earliest colonists, later immigrants, and their descendants have learned to be Americans or Canadians. These diverse descendants now share, to some extent at least, a common national culture.

In studying cultural diversity, we may distinguish between the universal, the generalized, and the particular. Certain social and cultural features are universal, shared by people everywhere. Others are merely generalities, found in several or many but not all cultures. Still other traits are particularities, limited or unique to certain cultures.

Universals are the traits that tend to distinguish *Homo sapiens* from other species. Human social universals include kinship, family living, child care, and food sharing. Cultural universals include religion (belief in supernatural beings, powers, and forces) and the incest taboo (prohibition against mating with or marrying a close relative).

Cultural **generalities** are similarities that occur in many but not all cultures. One reason for generalities is diffusion—borrowing between cultures. Societies can share the same traits because of borrowing or through (cultural) inheritance from a common cultural ancestor. Other generalities originate in independent invention of the same trait or pattern in separate cultures. Similar needs and circumstances have led people in different lands to innovate and change in parallel ways. They have independently come up with the same cultural solution to a recurrent problem.

One cultural generality that is present in many but not all societies is the nuclear family, a kinship group consisting of parents and children. Many Americans view the nuclear family as a proper and natural group, but it is not universal. It was totally absent, for example, among the Nayars, who lived on the Malabar Coast of India. The Nayars lived in female-headed households, and husbands and wives did not live together.

Cultures that share many traits may, however, emphasize very different values, practices, and institutions (such as individualism, respect for ancestors, or warfare). **Particularities**—distinctive traits and patterns—lend uniqueness to cultures. Most cultures use rituals to recognize such human

life cycle events as birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood, and death. But cultures vary about which event merits special celebration. Americans regard expensive weddings as more socially appropriate than lavish funerals. But the cultures of Madagascar take the opposite view. The marriage ceremony is a minor event that brings together just the couple and a few close relatives. A funeral, by contrast, is a measure of the deceased person's social position and lifetime achievement, and may attract a thousand or more.

UNIFYING FACTORS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

Culture is shared, but all societies contain divisive as well as unifying forces. For example, people of the same tribe are separated by their residence in different villages and membership in different kin groups. Nations, although united by government, are typically divided by class, region, ethnicity, religion, and political interest groups. As we describe in more detail in Chapter 4, the idea of common culture can be used to mobilize people, to solidify group identity and solidarity, and to promote special interests.

In any society or nation, a common cultural tradition can provide one basis for uniformity among its members. Whatever unity contemporary American culture has does not rest on a particularly strong central government. Nor is national unity based on common kinship, descent, or religion. In fact, many of the commonalities of behavior, belief, and activity that enable us to speak of contemporary American culture are relatively new. They are founded on and perpetuated by recent developments, particularly in business, transportation, and the media.

When we study contrasts between rural, urban, and suburban life, or relations among social class, ethnicity, and household organization, we are focusing on variation, a very important topic and the focus of this book. When we consider the active and creative use that each individual makes of popular culture (see the next chapter), we are also describing cultural diversity. Despite increasing diversity in the United States and Canada, we can still talk about an American or a Canadian national culture. Through common experiences in their enculturation, especially through exposure to the mass media, Americans and Canadians, respectively do come to share certain knowledge, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and acting, as is true of any culture. Many shared aspects of national culture override differences among individuals, genders, regions, or ethnic groups.

The media, especially television, have helped bring nationalism and its symbols, including cultural contrasts with the United States, to prominence in Canada. In spring 2000, a TV commercial produced in Toronto for Molson Canadian beer gained instantaneous national prominence. The ad featured the character Joe Canadian delivering what came to be known as "The Rant," which was soon to become a nationalist mantra for 30 million Canadians:

"I'm not a lumberjack or a fur trader; I don't live in an igloo, eat blubber or own a dogsled.

"I have a prime minister, not a president. I speak English and French, not American.

"I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack. [This refers to Canada's gender-neutral school curriculum, in which sewing is taught to both boys and girls.]

"I believe in peacekeeping, not policing; diversity, not assimilation."

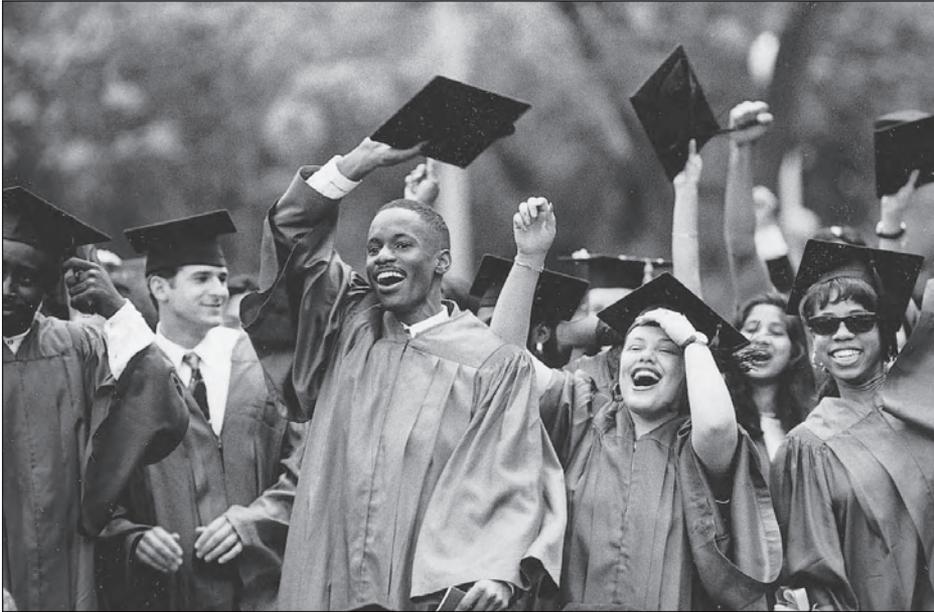
Images of maple leaves and beavers flashed on the screen as Joe reached his climax:

"Canada is the second-largest land mass, the first nation of hockey and the best part of North America. My name is Joe and I am Canadian." (quoted in Brooke 2000)

The Rant seems to have spurred the government of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, to announce that starting in September 2000, each student would start the day by singing "O Canada," and (as a member of the British Commonwealth) by pledging allegiance to the queen. Although The Rant was recited by ordinary Canadians from Vancouver to Halifax, one province did not join in this affirmation of national identity. In French-speaking Quebec, which has been governed by the separatist Parti Québécois since 1994, Canadian national symbols like the flag and anthem are officially ignored, and Molson Canadian beer is not even marketed (Brooke 2000).

It is fitting that anthropology, which originated as the study of non-Western societies, extend its lens to North American society and culture. We have seen that anthropology deals with cultural universals, generalities, and uniqueness. A national culture may be seen as a particular cultural variant, as interesting as any other. Techniques developed to interpret and analyze smaller-scale societies, where sociocultural uniformity is more marked, can also contribute to an understanding of Canadian or American life—the whole and its parts.

A **native anthropologist** is one who studies his or her own culture. Native anthropologists include Americans working in the United States, Canadians in Canada, French in France, and Nigerians in Nigeria. Many of us have turned to native anthropology after having first done fieldwork elsewhere. The academic training, fieldwork abroad, and cross-cultural focus that characterize anthropology tend to provide its practitioners with a degree of detachment and objectivity that most natives lack. On the other hand, life experience as a native can also be an advantage to the anthropologist embarking on a study of his or her own culture of origin. Nevertheless, much more than when working abroad, the native anthropologist is both participant and observer, often emotionally and intellectually involved in the events and beliefs being studied. Native anthropologists should be wary of their biases as natives and should attempt to be as objective with their own culture as they are with others.



Common cultural traditions provide a basis for uniformity among members of a society or nation. Among the unifying factors in contemporary American culture are graduation celebrations (high school and college) and associated customs, such as tossing hats in the air.

Knowledge of other cultures enables us both to appreciate and to question aspects of our own. Anthropological techniques developed to describe and analyze other cultures can be applied to North America as well. Yet because natives often see and explain their behavior very differently from the way anthropologists do, Canadian and American readers may disagree with some of the analyses and interpretations presented in this book. In part this is because you are natives, who know much more about your own culture than you do about any other. Also, individuals and groups within a culture (e.g., men and women, rich and poor, old and young, blacks and whites, teachers and students) may perceive that culture very differently. American culture assigns a high value to differences in individual opinion—and to the belief that one opinion is as good as another.

A reminder about the all-encompassing nature of culture may be useful here. Culture means much more than refinement, cultivation, education, and appreciation of classics and fine arts. Native anthropologists cannot ignore popular culture, especially the mass media and their impact. That TVs outnumber toilets in American households is a significant cultural fact. Kottak's observations about Michigan college students may be generalizable to other young Americans. They visit McDonald's more often than they do houses of worship. Almost all have seen a Walt Disney movie and have attended rock concerts and football games. If these observations are true of

young Americans generally, as we suspect they are, such shared experiences are major features of American enculturation patterns. Certainly any extra-terrestrial anthropologist doing fieldwork in the United States would stress them. Within the United States, the mass media and the culture of consumption have created major themes in contemporary national culture. These themes merit anthropological study.

The next chapter will consider, among other topics, the creative use that individuals and groups make of cultural forces, including media images. We will explore how, through different “readings” of the same “text,” people constantly make and remake culture. Here we take a different, but complementary, approach, focusing on some of the texts that have diffused most successfully in a given national culture. Such texts spread because they are culturally appropriate and, for various cultural reasons, able to carry some sort of meaning for millions of Americans. From the popular domains of sports, TV, movies, theme parks, and fast food we may identify certain very popular texts, such as football or the “Star Trek” myth, which was examined in Chapter 1. Other texts (e.g., blue jeans, baseball, and pizza) would enable us to make similar points—that there are powerful shared aspects of contemporary American national culture and that anthropological techniques can be used to interpret them.

Football

Football, we say, is only a game, but it has become a hugely popular spectator sport. (*Monday Night Football* on ABC was the only common program included in the 10 favorite TV programs of both blacks and whites in the United States in 1996–1997.*) Like team allegiance in general, football is a sport that both unites and divides us. Most Americans share the experience of watching TV football or attending games; yet they root for different teams, often passionately. On fall Saturdays millions of people travel to and from college football games. Smaller congregations meet in high school stadiums. Millions of Americans watch televised football. Indeed, half the adult population of the United States watches the annual Super Bowl (a spectacle, however, that may do as much to divide as to unite men and women, children and adults).

Because of its mass significance, then, football is an American (as well as a Canadian) popular cultural institution that merits anthropological attention. Popular sports manage to attract people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, regions, religions, political parties, jobs, social statuses, wealth levels, and even genders, as attendance at college games will show. The popularity of football, particularly professional football, depends directly on the mass media, especially television.

Is football, with its territorial incursion, hard hitting, and violence—occasionally resulting in injury—popular because we are violent people? Are

*As reported in a CNN series, *Race in America*, June 11, 1997.

football spectators vicariously realizing their own hostile and aggressive tendencies? Anthropologist W. Arens (1981) discounts this view, pointing out that football is a peculiarly North American pastime. Baseball has become a popular sport in the Caribbean, parts of Latin America, and Japan. Basketball and volleyball are also spreading. However, throughout most of the world, soccer is the most popular sport. Arens argues that if football were a particularly good channel for expressing aggression, it would have spread (as soccer and baseball have done) to many other countries, where people have as many aggressive tendencies and hostile feelings as we do. Furthermore, he suggests that if a sport's popularity rested simply on its appeal to a bloodthirsty temperament, boxing, a far bloodier sport, would be our national pastime. Arens concludes that the explanation for football's popularity lies elsewhere, and we agree.

Arens contends that football is popular because it symbolizes certain key features of North American life. In particular, it is characterized by teamwork based on elaborate specialization and division of labor, which are pervasive features of modern life. Susan Montague and Robert Morais (1981) take the analysis a step further. They argue that Americans appreciate football because it presents a miniaturized and simplified version of modern organizations. People have trouble understanding organizational bureaucracies, whether in business, universities, or government. Football, these anthropologists argue, helps us understand how decisions are made and rewards are allocated in organizations.

Montague and Morais link football's values, particularly teamwork, to those associated with business. Like corporate workers, ideal players work hard and are dedicated to the team. Within organizations, however, decision making is complicated, and workers aren't always rewarded for their dedication and good job performance. Decisions are simpler and rewards are more consistent in football, these anthropologists contend, and this helps explain its popularity. Even if we can't figure out how General Motors and Microsoft run, any fan can become an expert on football's rules, teams, scores, statistics, and patterns of play. Even more important, football suggests that the values stressed by business really do pay off. Teams whose members work hardest, show the most spirit, and best develop and coordinate their talents can be expected to win more often than other teams do.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND AMERICAN POP CULTURE

Unlike the chapters that follow, this one has not focused primarily on variation. Instead, we have stressed experiences and enculturative forces that are common to many or most Americans. We have made several points here. One is that we can employ techniques developed to study other cultures to interpret our own. Also, we have seen that native anthropologists can contribute uniquely by coupling professional detachment with personal experience and

understanding. There are some questions we should bear in mind, though, as we ponder the adequacy of our analyses and explanations: Do natives accept them or prefer them to other interpretations? Do they enable natives to make more sense of familiar phenomena? Do they fit within a comparative framework provided by data and analyses from other societies? Can the relations we detect be confirmed by researchers who independently examine the same data?

We are witnessing major changes in the material conditions of North American life—particularly in work organization and technology, including transportation and information flows. Through the mass media, institutions such as sports, movies, TV shows, theme parks, and fast-food restaurants have become powerful elements of national culture. They provide a framework of common expectation and experience overriding differences in region, class, formal religious affiliation, political sentiments, gender, ethnic group, and place of residence.

For various reasons, Americans can see themselves not just as members of a varied and complex nation but also as a population united by distinctive shared symbols, customs, and experiences. Despite its own internal diversity, then, American culture is one among many distinctive national cultures, part of the range of global cultural diversity.

MECHANISMS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

We live in a world of increasing intercultural contact, in which the pace of cultural change has accelerated enormously. Cultures in contact typically get traits from each other through borrowing or diffusion. **Diffusion**, an important mechanism of cultural change, has gone on throughout human history, because cultures have never been truly isolated. As the anthropologist Franz Boas (1940/1966) noted many years ago, contact between neighboring tribes has always existed and has extended over enormous areas. Diffusion is *direct* when two cultures trade, intermarry, or wage war on one another. Diffusion is *forced* when one culture subjugates another and imposes its customs on the dominated group. Diffusion is *indirect* when products and patterns move from group A to group C via group B without any firsthand contact between A and C. In the modern world much international diffusion is due to the spread of the mass media.

Acculturation, another mechanism of cultural change, is the exchange of cultural features that results when groups come into continuous firsthand contact. The original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be changed by this contact (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936). We usually speak of acculturation when the contact is *between* nations or cultures. Parts of the cultures change, but each group remains distinct. In situations of continuous contact, cultures exchange and blend foods, recipes, music, dances, clothing, tools, and techniques.

Independent invention—the process by which humans innovate, creatively finding new solutions to old and new problems—is another important mechanism of cultural change. Faced with comparable challenges, people in different places have innovated in similar or parallel ways, which is one reason that cultural generalities exist. One example is the independent invention of agriculture in the Middle East and Mexico. In both areas people who faced food scarcity began to domesticate crops. Over the course of history, innovations have spread at the expense of earlier practices. Often a major invention, such as agriculture, triggers a series of subsequent inter-related changes. Thus, in both Mexico and the Middle East, agriculture led to many social, political, and legal changes, including notions of property and distinctions in wealth, class, and power.

Another reason for cultural change—one that is critical for understanding contemporary North America—is **globalization**. This term refers to linkages (through transportation, migration, the media, and various economic and political processes) that are developing at an accelerating pace among people and nations throughout the world. Globalization, examined further in Chapter 3, links all contemporary people, directly or indirectly, in the modern world system.

THE USES OF CULTURE

Nowadays, “culture,” as a term and as a concept, is used liberally both by people in general and by professionals. When people want to assert certain unique qualities, or to justify patterns of behavior, they may claim, “It’s my culture!” Teens may distinguish themselves from other family members by claiming a “different culture.” Some students use their “culture of birth” by taking a test in their native language to avoid taking courses to fulfill a foreign language requirement.

Business stresses the importance of “corporate culture.” Marketers target “culture niches” to pitch products and services. Everett Rogers (1995) points out that understanding the “culture of individuals” in a system targeted for change provides change agents with information needed to design and implement effective innovations.

“Cultural competency” is a key to quality services in health, education, and welfare. Disparities in medical diagnosis and treatment affect the health status of various minorities. In the United States these minorities include African Americans, certain Spanish-speaking groups, Native North Americans, and some groups of Asian descent. In Canada they include Indians, or First Nations. Indians and Pakistanis are minorities in the United Kingdom, North Africans in France, Turks in Germany, Kurds in Turkey, and Ethiopian Jews in Israel (Geiger 2001). A primary reason for inequitable health care delivery is a lack of cultural awareness and competence by health care professionals.

The notion of “school culture” marks the speech, scholarship, administration, and teaching of American educators. Learning, curriculum development, leadership, and reform are linked to the culture of the school—its history, its social organization, its core values, and the people who define it (Deal and Peterson 1999; Kozaitis 2000). Attention to culture is intrinsic to economic development, social work, and public welfare services. Culturally compatible development requires participation by local people in plans that affect them (Kottak 1990a). Programs directed at culturally defined “client populations” rely on cultural awareness for success (Green 1982).

Nowhere is the use of culture more evident than in organized efforts by self-identified affinity groups who demand human rights on the basis of “our culture.” The movement to valorize culture and identity within the African diaspora boasts *négritude*, a configuration of history, experience, ideology, and sentiment shared by blacks. The concept of *sisterhood* is equally powerful in the Women’s Liberation Movement, the initial objectives of which included “the development of a women’s culture” (Newton 2000, p. 114). As people with disabilities forge their own civil rights movement, they emphasize the “celebration of separate culture” (Shapiro 1993, pp. 74–104).

Understanding contemporary social movements requires appreciation of the nature, construction, and uses of culture. In Chapter 3 we discuss globalization and the active and creative ways in which people rely on culture to negotiate, adapt, and influence social transformations.