

Defining 'culture,' but not as anthropologists would

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Body

In his 1963 novel "Planet of the Apes," Pierre Boulle imagined a monkey civilization that, by mimicking human behavior, eventually displaces human culture. But human culture is not so easily impersonated. In "The Survival of Culture," a collection of essays culled from the *New Criterion* and edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball, contributors remind us that there is an older, more proper definition of "culture" than the one employed by anthropologists today - precisely those civilized activities that cannot be aped by simians.

Keith Windschuttle, the Australian scholar, notes that until recently the term "culture" was used in the sense established by Matthew Arnold's 19th-century book, "Culture and Anarchy," as "the best that has been thought and said." Culture in the Arnoldian sense - which today goes by the designation "high culture" - entails the recognition of a hierarchy of achievement in all forms of artistic, intellectual, and moral endeavor.

Anthropologists, on the other hand, use "culture" in a purely descriptive fashion to describe the habits and customs of a particular population, cultural achievements that can't be judged across different societies. Shakespearean drama can't be said to be superior to Kabuki theater, for example, only different. Throughout the book contributors address the issue of cultural relativism, the most conspicuous example being the brouhaha surrounding Silvio Berlusconi's proclamation of the superiority of Western civilization over Islam.

Appearing in Germany shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Italian prime minister said: "We must be aware of the superiority of our civilization, a system that has guaranteed well-being, respect for human rights, and - in contrast with Islamic countries - respect for religious and political rights." Mr. Berlusconi did nothing other than state the obvious. Yet politicians throughout Europe quickly denounced his comments and Mr. Berlusconi eventually recanted.

The European tendency, writes columnist Mark Steyn in his contribution to this collection, is to see deviation from basic guarantees of political decency "as just another 'alternative lifestyle' - lesbianism, vegetarianism, totalitarianism, whatever." This may save some public figures the burden of judging others, but it constitutes a flight from reality.

When, as Mr. Steyn notes, European diplomats "are willing to pretend the foreign minister of Syria is no different from the foreign minister of Luxembourg or New Zealand," they deny all we know about the differences between democracy and dictatorship.

The loss of high culture means nothing less than the failure to recognize the existence of an objective universe. "The idea that Western rationality must produce universally valid knowledge increasingly appears doubtful," the Australian sociologist R.W. Connell has written. "It is, on the face of it, ethnocentric." Mr. Connell points to efforts made by some Muslim philosophers to ground science in different, non-Western assumptions about the world, producing "Islamic science" as an alternative to Newton and Einstein.

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One can only wish that Islamist terrorists would follow such advice, quips Mr. Windschuttle, and shun Western technology in favor of armaments produced by Muslim science - the most recent innovation of which was the Mameluke curved sabre in the 14th century.

These pages are full of warnings about the tendency to ignore reality. Mr. Kimball mentions the incipient normalization of "gender reassignment surgery." Robert Bork examines jurists who rule with marked indifference to the actual content of the law. Kenneth Minogue, at a more general level, focuses on the modern desire to enter a profession without recognizing its conventions and boundaries as real limitations.

In politics, David Pryce-Jones takes on the European Union for abandoning the democratic ideals that are Europe's heritage. [When Denmark rejected the euro in a September 2000 referendum, the Belgian foreign minister, speaking on behalf of the EU, averred, "I personally think it's very dangerous to organize referendums when you're not sure you're going to win them. If you lose that's a big problem for Europe."]

Mr. Pryce-Jones also finds the EU concocting a fictitious "European identity," complete with "European values," and imposing it on nations with their own distinct languages, laws, and histories. The EU brass, argues Mr. Pryce-Jones, is "insulated from reality," trying to impose a fantastic utopian vision on a reluctant public through an autocratic, remote bureaucracy. Europe, he writes, has forgotten the lesson taught by its earlier totalitarianisms and their own attacks on the nation-state.

This sort of politics, unmoored from reality, is really a kind of sorcery, conjuring up political institutions out of nothing. Tocqueville called this approach to government the "literary spirit in politics," which "consists in seeking for what is novel and ingenious rather than for what is true; in preferring the showy to the useful; . . . and lastly, in judging by impressions rather than reasons." In losing our sense of culture, we've lost our bearings.

"The Survival of Culture " includes important advice on regaining those bearings. There is advice from Edmund Burke, who - as Martin Greenberg puts it in his essay -"despised a speculative, abstract politics," preferring a standard rooted in nature. There is advice from George Orwell, who worried about the "horror of abstract thought." There is Hannah Arendt, who upheld the integrity of the "objective status of the cultural world" and a "nonsocial and authentic criterion" for judging its achievements.

There is a human tendency, especially in times of crisis, to retreat from a world of civilized standards to a more romantic, blood-and-soil nationalism. After World War II, and the apparent failure of the European project, Charles de Gaulle located the vitality of the West not in its achievements of high culture, but in "the value, the power, the shining example of these ancient peoples," by which he meant the various nations of Western Europe.

Yet "Nostalgia," explains Mr. Kimball in the book's concluding essay, "is a version of sentimentality - a predilection, that is to say, to distort rather than acknowledge reality." Eric Ormsby's contribution to the book is about the fate of libraries in the age of digitization, but Mr. Kimball applies it to culture at large: our fascination with means has led us "to ignore and neglect the ends."

America, which never possessed a culture in the anthropological sense - Americans did not exist as an ancient people before the founding of the United States - has been better able to maintain a sense of purpose or universal mission. That mission, after all, is the only foundation of an American identity. In her essay, political scientist Diana Schaub captures this phenomenon by contrasting American patriotic songs - she singles out the verse "This is my country! Land of my choice!" - with foreign odes about motherlands and fatherlands, "children of the soil," and pure bloodlines.

So it's not surprising that American principles have remained relatively stable. As Mr. Steyn notes, "The U.S. Constitution is not only older than the French, German, Italian, Belgian, Greek and Spanish constitutions, it's older than all of them put together."

It's also natural that George W. Bush could describe the attack on American cities as "an attack on civilization." What we're defending, it turns out, are not the various customs of our culture, unmediated by reference to objective standards of civilization, undirected toward any purpose; that's ape culture, and it's neither threatened nor under

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assault. What's at risk is civilization, a universal system of standards that can act as a guide for all human societies. Our enemies know it. We should, too.

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THE SURVIVAL OF CULTURE: PERMANENT VALUES IN A VIRTUAL AGE

By Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball

Ivan R. Dee, \$28.95, 256 pages

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