

PART I

Culture



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Several of the students in the course I teach on the sociology of violence came from other countries to attend school in Boston. Two were from Asia, one was from Europe, one was from South America, and another was from an island in the Caribbean. About 15 minutes into our first meeting, I realized that their presence in the classroom would make a difference in the way I approached the course. It really didn't take a psychic to figure out that communication would be more difficult. From the first day, there were lots of bewildered looks and blank stares to remind me. Then there were questions.

At first, I considered the problem to be only one of language. In plain English, I believed that my plain English was, to them, not so plain. By the end of our first session together, however, I recognized that the problem was more profound than just misunderstood words and phrases. Indeed, from the types of questions they were asking, I concluded that some of the international students in my class also lacked familiarity with those practices, objects, and ideas that most Americans share on an everyday basis and therefore take for granted as the American way of life. My foreign students were, in a word, *unfamiliar* with American culture.

Consider a concrete example. In our discussion of the manner in which mass killings are reported by the mass media, I introduced James Huberty's rampage through a McDonald's fast-food restaurant located in a suburb of San Diego. I noted that several newspapers around the country had referred to Huberty's killing spree (he killed 21, mostly Hispanic children) as Mass McMurder and The Big Mac Attack. The American students immediately understood the glib, possibly offensive aspects of these newspaper headlines, but three of the international students had only questions: What is a Big Mac? one asked. Not knowing the logo of this famous hamburger chain, another wanted to know why the paper called Huberty's attack McMurder. Before continuing our discussion of mass killings, therefore, we spent several minutes talking about fast-food hamburgers.

Now, it is true that degree of familiarity with American culture varies quite a bit among the peoples of the world. And among my international students, I noticed immense variation in this respect. In fact, the young woman from Western Europe was quite familiar with American values and customs, at least much more so than her counterparts from Asia or South America. Though she had been in the United States only a few days before the course began, she had eaten many times in American fast-food restaurants (McDonald's restaurants are located throughout Europe and increasingly in other areas of the world), had watched American television, and was also acquainted more with the American brand of humor. That's because the values and customs in her country were so similar to ours. They are likely to be, of course, because we Americans have had enormous contact with

Europe and have derived much of our culture from it. The process whereby cultural traits spread from one society to another (e.g., from the Mother Country England to the United States) is known as *cultural diffusion*.

Clearly, we can thank (or blame) cultural diffusion for giving us many important ideas and objects that originated in, or at least passed first through, Europe. In “The Immaculate Americans,” we discover that it was the British who, during the Industrial Revolution, were plumbing pioneers. By the early part of the 20th century, however, the idea of plumbing for the masses had traversed the Atlantic Ocean, and American society had taken the lead in developing private bathrooms for the majority of its citizens. For the first time in history, the home bathroom was regarded as a middle-class necessity. Also in “The Immaculate Americans,” we learn that collective tolerance for odor varies from place to place, from one society to another. In some other parts of the world, Americans are viewed as neurotically concerned with their personal cleanliness. We certainly do use tremendous amounts of deodorant and mouthwash; such products have become part of our culture.

The ideas that we often take for granted or believe to be constants in nature—for example, our ideas about cleanliness—may actually originate in the culture that we learn. But what is the origin of culture? We know that people aren’t born with it—although they are born with the capacity for culture. Only humans seem to have the full-blown capability; other animals often share a way of life but not one that is learned and passed along to the next generation. For the most part, animals are programmed from birth to act and react in social situations. (For example, birds don’t learn to fly by watching other birds do it first; nor do mother birds teach them. They develop the ability for flight by instinct alone.) The origin of a particular type of cultural content—whether one or another thing is regarded as proper and right—is also a fascinating topic.

Some sociologists and anthropologists believe that economics may play a major role in determining the particular character of a culture. The important 19th-century theorist Karl Marx argued, in writing about the rise of communism, that the economic system of a society determines almost everything about other social institutions. He believed that religion, family life, and the press were all handmaidens to the prevailing economic system; that is, they existed essentially to support and maintain the economic status quo, to make sure that it survived. From a Marxian point of view, therefore, the Protestant belief about work—the religious conviction that hard work is a sign of personal salvation—exists only because capitalism needs a way to dupe or mislead workers (that is, a way of motivating workers to tolerate their terrible working conditions, accept their exploitation by the owners of production, and be achievement oriented in the interest of maximizing

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corporate profit). You don't have to accept Marxism to agree that he was right to emphasize the role of the economy in determining the complexion of mass culture—popular art and music—in a capitalistic society like ours.

Middle-aged and senior citizen rock musicians such as Van Morrison, Paul Simon, Mick Jagger, and Billy Joel may not help to preserve capitalism, but their continuing popularity is probably a result of the appeal they have to huge numbers of people who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s and who are willing to spend their hard-earned money in the interest of nostalgia.

In “Baby Boomers” we are introduced to a possibly important source of cultural expression. The baby boomers—that generation of people born between 1946 and 1964—continue to have a certain amount of cultural clout but only so long as they spend their money. How will they be treated if they give up their credit cards? Only time will tell.

Culture often takes on human form and substance. The cultural values cherished by Americans are embodied in the heroes we choose to revere on a collective level. During the opening decades of the 20th century, our cultural heroes were what sociologist Leo Löwenthal in 1961 called idols of production—industrial tycoons who served as role models for citizens who accepted some version of the American Dream and aspired to be successful and wealthy just like their heroes. By mid-century, however, Americans had instead shifted from idols of production to idols of consumption—the entertainers and sports figures who filled our leisure hours with their music, drama, and athletic prowess.

In “The Demise of Bystander Apathy,” I speculate that we have recently undergone yet another major shift in our selection of cultural heroes. Coming out of an era of spectatorship and passivity, we now seem to admire idols of activism, those men and women who are seen as having taken control of their destiny, who aren't afraid to step forward and stand apart from the crowd to take a firm position. In the face of big business, big government, and the threat of terrorism, we respect individuals who take charge of their everyday lives because we hope to be able to do the same. In “Making Monsters Into Celebrities,” however, I argue that our cynicism is showing when we place the worst sorts of murderers in places where we formerly put our most virtuous heroes.

Culture has thus far been associated with an entire society. Yet even the smallest social settings can develop a shared set of rules for behavior—that is, a culture. In “Elevator Culture,” I discuss the proper way to behave in an elevator when riding with other passengers. Surprisingly, perhaps, it turns out that elevator culture permits very little positive guidance for behavior; in fact, there may be only one socially correct way to stand in an elevator. No wonder some people prefer to take the stairs! Before turning to the snapshots

of culture in this first section of the book, let's return for a moment to the situation of having a number of international students in the small seminar that I teach. In introducing this section of the book, I emphasized the communication problems posed by my students' lack of familiarity with American culture. What I failed to stress, however, was that their presence in my seminar also had an important positive impact by bringing to bear on our classroom discussions the experiences of the diverse cultures they represented. In some cases, students from other countries added to our discussions by reinforcing the universal validity of our sociological generalizations. Their own experiences suggested that what was true about American society might also apply to their homelands. In other cases, however, my students added a cautionary input. Based on their experiences, certain relationships discussed in our class could probably not be generalized beyond American, or perhaps Western, culture. As a sociologist, I can safely say that I learned a great deal from being immersed, even if only on a secondhand basis, in cultures from around the world.

The Immaculate Americans

Being Cleaner Doesn't Mean We're Better

Body odor is big business. Every year, we immaculate Americans spend more money on deodorants and mouthwashes than we contribute to the United Way. In addition, we probably pass more time scrubbing, washing, spraying, bathing, squirting, and gargling than any other people in the history of the world. Every American, in fact, learns from an early age that cleanliness is considered next to godliness—a sign that an individual is morally pure and sinless. No wonder Americans spend more than \$1 billion annually on soap—it's part of our culture.

In other parts of the world, however, we are regarded as neurotically concerned with our personal cleanliness. In some European countries, for example, American tourists are easily identified by their demands for a room with a private bath. Meanwhile, their European counterparts more often stay in rooms where they wash up daily in a small sink and take their baths down the hall. In their own countries, anyone caught showering twice a day would probably be regarded as either eccentric or ill.

Notwithstanding our present-day preoccupation, Americans can hardly take credit (or blame) for inventing a concern for cleanliness. Arab intermediaries, in arranging a marriage, sometimes rejected a prospective bride who didn't smell nice. Sniffing and nose kissing have long been practiced by the Inuit of Canada, Philippine Islanders, and Samoans who recognized the desire for a pleasant odor. And bathing for purification is an ancient custom practiced by the early Hebrews, Muslims, and Hindus.

Medieval royalty even took baths but only on occasion. In England, for example, King John bathed three times a year, always before a major religious festival. But church authorities and medical practitioners in the Middle

Ages generally frowned on bathing, denying the general population access to the few existing baths. Instead, medieval people stuffed their nostrils with strong perfumes to disinfect the air and reduce the onslaught of black plague. Even after the Middle Ages, Queen Elizabeth I of England bathed only monthly (whether she needed it or not).

Major efforts to overcome the problem of personal cleanliness for the masses really weren't made until the mid-19th century. During the Industrial Revolution, the British were the plumbing pioneers. For those who lacked private facilities, the state built public bathhouses consisting of individual bathrooms with centrally controlled plumbing. By the early part of the 20th century, however, cultural diffusion had taken effect, and America had taken the lead in developing private bathrooms for the majority of citizens. For the first time in history, the home bathroom was no longer viewed as a status symbol but was regarded as a middle-class necessity.

Of course, everything is relative when it comes to culture, and some Americans have acquired such lofty cultural standards today that they think foreigners smell. Perhaps they are right, at least when judged by a national norm that refuses to tolerate any body odor at all. The odorous outsiders (who, by the way, probably smell pretty much like human beings are intended to) are then regarded by some Americans as dirty, slovenly, or perhaps even morally impure.

The bias is not new. Odor has often been used to discredit entire groups of people. During the Middle Ages, for example, European Jews were widely believed to have drunk the blood of Christian children as part of the Passover ritual to rid themselves of an odor of evil. It was also rumored that after their conversion to Christianity, the Jewish malodor miraculously disappeared.

Closer to home, American blacks, Latinos, Hawaiians, and Native Americans have all been stereotyped in cultural images at one time or another as smelling different. And one of the most offensive olfactory images is that of elderly citizens—especially nursing home residents—who are too often stereotyped as reeking from incontinence, indifference, and the ravages of age.

Just how accurate are such cultural images of group differences in odor? Is it possible that the members of different ethnic and racial groups really do have distinctive smells? Consider, for example, the possible effect on the quality and quantity of perspiration of dietary differences or of jobs requiring strenuous physical activity. Such differences do vary by group; they might even differ by ethnicity or social class. Yet the perception of such group differences in odor seems entirely out of proportion to their actual occurrence, if they happen at all.

More likely, the charge of minority malodor is needed by bigots who are eager to justify discriminatory treatment against a group of people by

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dehumanizing them. The reasoning is simple enough: Animals, not human beings, give off a stench. Human beings must be treated according to the rules of civilized society, but animals can be mistreated, even slaughtered, at will. The members of group X give off a stench (they don't bathe and live like pigs); therefore, they can be mistreated.

The sociological question is answered best by recognizing that perception of odor is only one component in the much larger repertoire of cultural racism. Our beliefs about various groups are often supported by deeply rooted emotions acquired early that can linger throughout life. In the Jim Crow South, white Southerners had an intense emotional reaction to the possibility of desegregating their public facilities. Black skin was regarded almost as a contagious physical condition, something dirty that might rub off and contaminate those individuals who were fortunate enough to be white—hence the need for norms requiring separate public conveniences that imply close contact, such as restaurants, theaters, buses, water fountains, and restrooms.

In his analysis of race relations in the United States, James Comer, himself a black American who overcame poverty and discrimination to become a well-known psychiatrist and author, recounts the story of a white teenage girl who was scolded by her father for having put a coin in her mouth. He yelled, "Get that money out of your mouth—it might have been in a nigger's hand!" His reaction reminds us of an important principle of human behavior: You really don't have to smell like a skunk to be treated like one.

Baby Boomers

A Generation Without a Gap

Rock music has long been a symbol of adolescent rebellion. The greasers of the 1950s wouldn't have been caught dead listening to recordings of Glenn Miller, Woody Herman, or any other musician reminiscent of their parents' day. Similarly, members of the 1960s hip generation were too intent on distancing themselves from what they saw as oppressive traditional authority to regard tunes by Fats Domino and Chuck Berry with more than historical curiosity.

That's why it is so intriguing that for the last couple of decades, high school and college students didn't reject—and, in fact, embraced—the popular music of yesteryear. Of course, they still identified with the superstar songsters of their own age—Backstreet Boys, Hanson, Spice Girls, Fiona Apple, Oasis, and the like. But amazingly, they also admired longtime rock idols of the 1960s and early 1970s who were well into what we euphemistically call the prime of life, otherwise known as middle age. During the 1990s, oldsters such as Pink Floyd, Fleetwood Mac, Aerosmith, Carly Simon, the Grateful Dead, Mick Jagger, Van Morrison, Bonnie Raitt, George Harrison, and Paul Simon all had top-selling CDs or videos. Paul Simon's Grammy-winning album *Graceland* was a top-ranked CD. And according to *Billboard* magazine, among the top concert moneymakers of the 1990s were middle-agers Billy Joel, Bob Seger, the Eagles, and David Bowie. During the same period, concerts by such 1960s oldies legends as 51-year-old Gene Pitney and Shirley Alston Reeves, former lead singer of the Shirelles, drew sellout crowds. In the late 1990s, the top concert draws continued to include an overrepresentation of such late middle-agers as the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Barbra Streisand, and Fleetwood Mac. Even more recently, Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, and Billy Joel have held sold-out concerts around the country.

Part of the continuing popularity of the 1960s rock stars was their nostalgic appeal to the moving human population explosion we now call the baby boomers, 76 million American men and women born between 1946 and 1964. Many of them were just coming of age during the 1960s as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan entered the music scene or later as Woodstock launched their generation into the 1970s.

Even as their oldest members now approach their early 60s, the baby boomers wax nostalgic. They have glowing memories of the formative period in their lives and the music that it spawned. The passage of decades has not changed their appetite for the rock and rock songs on which they were raised.

But it isn't only nostalgic baby boomers who have craved the sounds of the 1960s and 1970s; their younger brothers and sisters and in some cases their children also did—and in a big way. Only a few years ago, for example, the weather vane of adolescent opinion, *Teen* magazine, reported the results of a survey of its readers' favorite entertainers. Among the names of idols in the entertainment world were names associated with a previous generation, many of whom were 30 years older than their teenybopper fans—Kenny Rogers, Alabama, Bill Cosby, the Judds, and Cybill Shepherd. Similarly, a poll of the youthful audience for a popular MTV all-request music program named “Heart and Soul” by the Monkees as its top video of the year and 42-year-old Davy Jones as its choice for cutest guy. As recently as 1998, *Seventeen* magazine raved about concerts by oldsters from Janet Jackson to Tina Turner and focused on the future of youthful Deadheads in the aftermath of Jerry Garcia's death. Even more shocking, senior citizen singer Tony Bennett has during recent years made a spectacular comeback, enjoying popularity even in the teenage music market.

Baby boomer nostalgia has also inspired many of the top advertising agencies to include pop oldies in their commercials. The fast-food company Burger King has used the Everly Brothers' “Wake Up Little Susie,” the laxative Senokot made use of a rendition of James Brown's “I Got You (I Feel Good),” Toyota featured a version of Sly and the Family Stone's “Everyday People,” Applebee's played an adaptation of Creedence Clearwater Revival's “Suzie Q,” and Sears employed the lyrics of Roy Orbison's “You Got It.”

In 2007 alone, TV commercials have featured the music of the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Elvis, the Lovin' Spoonful, and Van Morrison.

During the 1960s, long before they were given a label, today's baby boomers had not only large numbers (half the population of the United States was under 25) but also plenty of disposable income. And they often disposed of it on 35-mm single-lens reflex cameras, stereo components, bell-bottom jeans, miniskirts, Hula Hoops, and so on. Business interests were, of course, thoroughly pleased with such free-spending habits—so pleased, in

fact, that such commercials as the Oil of Olay ads promised that you wouldn't look over 25! And in his best-selling work *The Greening of America*, law professor Charles Reich raised the possibility that our entire society would soon be transformed in the image of youthful hippies of the day.

During the closing years of the 1960s, there was reason to make such a prediction. The baby boomers were role models for everyone who emulated their teenage children's appearance. Middle-aged women donned bell-bottom jeans, tie-dyed shirts, sandals, and love beads while their husbands wore their hair shoulder length, their ties psychedelic, and their sideburns to the end of their earlobes. Many also grew beards and mustaches to lengths that today would be regarded as thoroughly outrageous. Indeed, the style of the day was the style of the baby boomer generation: It seemed as if everybody was either young or wanted to be.

Into the new millennium, however, the baby boomers have finally lost at least some of their cultural clout. They still boast large numbers and spend lots of money on microwave ovens, compact disc players, home theaters, and personal computers. But the most important factor influencing the recent decline in their cultural clout is the competition they have gotten from their own offspring who are now in their teenaged years or older.

The children of the baby boomers (sometimes referred to as the baby boomerang generation) hardly match the huge numbers associated with their parents but are nevertheless a mini-baby boom of their own, representing more than 17 million of the nation's high school students and almost 20 million college students. And like their mothers and fathers, the fact that the baby boomers' teenagers have plenty of disposable income has attracted the attention of commercial interests around the country who are eager to sell their cars, cosmetics, and fast food.

As a result, the popular music industry has undergone a dramatic change, no longer depending almost exclusively on baby boomers for inspiration or consumption. The oldies format has all but vanished from radio and with it the sounds of Elvis, Motown, and the Beach Boys (Fisher, 2007). Middle-aged rock artists continue to appeal, but they share the spotlight with a whole new group of youthful rappers—Ludacris, Joe Budden, 50 Cent, Obie Trice, The White Stripes, The Streets, Nelly, and Lil' Kim—whose names are as foreign to baby boomers as are the musicians of Asia or the Middle East. Moreover, the characters on primetime television and the models in commercials are once again as likely to be young as they are middle-aged. The likes of Katie Couric, Andie MacDowell, and Adam Sandler continue to enjoy popularity, but so do younger entertainers like Kelly Clarkson, Christina Aguilera, Lindsay Lohan, and Miley Cyrus.

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Recognizing the possibly diminishing influence of the boomers, the American Association of Retired Persons—whose membership consists of Americans 50 and older—has begun to promote concerts and radio formats for elders. In 2007, the organization sponsored a Tony Bennett national concert tour and stage shows featuring Earth, Wind & Fire and Rod Stewart. Moreover, boomers continue to buy lots of CDs, while their youthful counterparts are instead increasingly downloading music from the Internet. There are also signs that certain rock stations in major cities may return to an oldies format, simply because teenagers have reduced their interest in listening to music on broadcast radio. Among the top recording artists in July 2007 were boomer favorites Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, and Bob Marley. Since the year 2000, a number of seasoned songsters have attracted large audiences. Boomers continue to flock to live concerts given by Jimmy Buffett, ZZ Top, Ozzy Osbourne, the Village People, Tina Turner, U2, Paul McCartney, Prince, and Bruce Springsteen. The continuing popularity of boomer artists may be helped along by a fundamental shift in the thinking of youngsters. Until recently, teenagers and their parents hardly crossed the lines that separated their musical tastes. For example, most boomers of the 1960s wouldn't have been caught dead admitting they listened to Eddie Cantor or Al Jolson, popular singers from their parents' generation. By contrast, today's young people are less inclined to conceive of music in chronological terms. All of the musical trends of the last five decades seem to coexist.

What is the future course of events likely to be for aging baby boomers? Though now forced to share the cultural spotlight with their own teenaged children, the baby boomers still have large numbers on their side. By the year 2025, when they achieve senior citizenship, more than 20% of the population will be over 65.

Yet it is a sad truth that numbers alone are as likely to ensure poverty as power. In fact, elder Americans living 200 years ago commanded much greater respect and privilege than they do today, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that only 10% of the population lived to celebrate their 60th birthday. Granted, this figure is skewed somewhat by high rates of infant mortality. Nonetheless, under Puritanism, old age was regarded as a sign of election and a special gift from God. But when longevity increased and more sizable numbers of people survived to old age, the cultural clout of elders declined. Specifically, preferential seating arrangements in public vehicles for older people were abolished, mandatory retirement laws appeared, youthful fashions were preferred, and eldest sons lost their inheritance advantages.

More than sheer numbers, then, graying baby boomers of the future will need to maintain the free-spending habits that endeared them to commercial interests if they are to maintain any of their cultural clout. Not only will they

need plenty of money, but they must be willing to spend it as they did in the past. If they are anything like previous generations of older Americans, however, this may not be realistic. Senior citizens tend to become economy conscious by reducing their use of credit and by shopping for price. Even if many baby boomers refuse to retire at 65 or 70, they will likely decide to temper their consumerism in favor of preparing for an uncertain future in terms of health care, economic depression, inflation, and the like. Depending on the course of public policy over the next few decades, even financially secure individuals may become quite conservative in their spending habits. This does not mean that aging baby boomers will be asked to live in poverty, only that they may be forced to give up their place as the cultural kingpins of American society.

The Demise of Bystander Apathy

We Admire Idols of Activism

In 1964, in a now classic case, Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death in the middle of the night while 38 of her neighbors listened from the safety of their apartments. Although the victim screamed for help and her assailant took almost 30 minutes to kill her, no one even reported the incident to the police, never mind fought off Genovese's killer.

Social scientists of the day argued that this apparent indifference was a result of what they called diffusion of responsibility. That is, although they may have been concerned for the victim, Genovese's neighbors also felt a lack of personal responsibility to intervene. They reasoned, Why should I risk my neck when there are other witnesses who will surely come to the rescue? However it was explained at the time, the Genovese case was the first nationally recognized episode of bystander apathy—one of the most distasteful by-products of the American preoccupation with spectatorship.

Although it was first acknowledged then, bystander apathy is a phenomenon not peculiar to the 1960s, nor is it exclusive to any one generation of people. Just by going through recent newspaper stories, it would not be difficult to argue that people still do not help one another.

Take the Manchester, New Hampshire, woman who was brutally raped in a yard just steps away from her apartment. Apparently, she was in full view of several of her neighbors, but they ignored her pleas for help.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, a motorcyclist injured in an accident lay on a crowded highway and counted 900 cars over a 3-hour period before anyone stopped to assist him. In Boston, a third-year medical student was jumped by four teenagers while riding his bicycle home from the hospital. Many people watched, but none of them intervened. In New York City, a group of jeering and joking youths watched while a 30-year-old man was electrocuted on the third rail of the subway station at Times Square. And on and on.

Observers of the social scene have used such cases in arguing for the existence of a destructive and callous side of human nature. Based in part on the writings of Freud and, more recently, of such ethnologists as Konrad Lorenz who emphasize the evolutionary basis for aggressive behavior, they have focused on bystander apathy to illustrate how people are moving away from one another. This point of view is sometimes so thoroughly one sided, however, that it ignores the fact that altruism is a value in virtually all human societies and forms the basis for most of the world's great religions. Americans have long institutionalized altruism by awarding medals for outstanding acts of selfless heroism as, for example, in the medals awarded by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission or, during wartime, in the U.S. Armed Forces' awarding of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

While some observers dwell on the seedier side of human nature, hundreds of others donate one of their kidneys for transplantation into another human being. Thousands more have donated their blood at some personal expense and inconvenience. And millions regularly donate money to their favorite charities.

Following September 11, 2001, the nation's charities were swamped with checks, cash, clothes, and even frequent-flier miles. During the first two weeks alone, donations hit \$500 million. By August 2002, the 10 largest charities claimed they had collected \$2.3 billion.

And the sources were so diverse: race drivers donating helmets, an all-star rock concert at Madison Square Garden, school bake sales in Wyoming, and, in Massachusetts, Congressman Marty Meehan's Education Fund to help the victims' families.

The response to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 was no less substantial. Hundreds of thousands of evacuees were welcomed by the residents of communities around the country. Americans donated money, medical supplies, blood, and clothing.

Today, some 40 years after the Genovese case, these acts of generosity and selflessness seem more abundant than ever. In addition, there seems to be less tolerance for those individuals who respond to others with indifference or selfishness. In fact, bystander apathy seems fast becoming the exception to what may be a new norm of social life: being willing to risk inconvenience, embarrassment, and even personal safety to come to the rescue of the victims of crimes and accidents. The evidence is, at this point, admittedly anecdotal and informal, but it is nonetheless highly suggestive. There have been numerous reports recently of acts of great heroism and courage performed by average citizens who haven't otherwise stood apart as paragons of virtue. The members of this breed of Good Samaritans are very serious about taking personal responsibility for the plight of others, refusing to take refuge in the anonymity of the crowd or the masses.

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We used to see purse snatchers and muggers; now we also see bystanders who chase and catch the mugger. We used to read about physicians who drive past automobile accidents because of the fear of a lawsuit; now we also read about doctors who come to the rescue of accident victims and, in the process, may suffer injuries of their own. We used to see corruption in government and industry; now we also see whistle-blowers who risk being fired to expose practices that they believe to be dangerous to the public.

An example of personal altruism is the behavior of Richard Young, a New York City fireman, who risked serious injury to rescue a total stranger—a truck driver who hung by his arms from the steering wheel of the cab of his truck as it dangled over the edge of a bridge. Arriving on the scene, Young threw himself under the truck driver's body to break his fall. In saving the man's life, Young received a broken leg, a broken ankle, and severe back injuries.

In 1997, 53-year-old Harvey Randolph saw his neighbor Jill Fitzgerald being viciously attacked and bitten by four pit bulls. The 155-pound plumbing contractor rushed to Jill's side, where he was finally able to drag her to safety. The brutal attack left Jill with 113 wounds to her head, neck, back, arm, and legs, requiring 188 stitches. Harvey suffered an injury to his elbow, requiring surgery, and wounds to his hands and right leg.

In 1998, Bruce Fitzell was fishing down river from Healdsburg Veterans Memorial Beach in Sonoma County, California, when he spotted a swimmer helplessly slip below the surface. Bruce immediately swam to the spot where the swimmer had gone under and found him lying on the bottom of the river. He then pulled the drowning man to the surface and got him to shore, where a bystander administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) until the swimmer had regained consciousness and was breathing on his own.

In 2003, Daniel Creange, an off-duty Bogota, New Jersey, patrolman, observed a car swerve across lanes and strike two curbs and several traffic signs before coming to rest on the grass median of an off-ramp. The driver, 37-year-old Jimmy Mak, had suffered a seizure and lost control of his vehicle. Creange and another passerby pulled the unconscious man from his car and, seeing that he was not breathing, began CPR. Minutes later, paramedics stabilized Mak and drove him to Hackensack University Medical Center.

In 2007, an anonymous bystander in Arlington Heights, Virginia, saw a 7-year-old girl floating face down in an apartment swimming pool. He brought the unconscious girl to the side of the pool, where he performed CPR until she awoke. By the time she was transported to a nearby hospital, the youngster was in good condition. The anonymous spectator had saved her life.

Also in 2007, 50-year-old Wesley Autrey witnessed a teenager suffer a seizure and collapse onto subway tracks at Broadway's 137th Street Station in New York City. Autrey immediately jumped down onto the tracks and attempted to pull the teenager, still in the throes of a seizure, to safety. Recognizing there was not enough time to avoid an approaching train, Autrey pulled the teenager into the center of the tracks and lay on top of him. Two cars passed over the men before it stopped, leaving only about 2 inches to spare. Quick thinking on Autrey's part saved him and his fellow commuter from certain death.

What characteristics distinguish these Good Samaritans from the rest of humanity? Social scientists have discovered that individuals who intervene in a dangerous situation are likely to have had training in first aid, lifesaving, or police work. In addition, they tend to be exceptionally tall and heavy. These attributes give them the sense of competence or efficiency—through training and strength—necessary to be injected into potentially hazardous situations. Good Samaritans also tend to be adventurous types who have taken other risks with their personal safety. The most important conditions accounting for the rise of the Good Samaritan may be found in the types of heroes they choose to emulate.

Researchers have discovered a common factor among German Christians, who, during World War II, helped rescue the victims of their Nazi persecutors; civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s (called Freedom Riders); and altruistic children: the presence of someone to serve as a model of altruism. In the case of a child, that model is likely to be an intensely moralistic parent with whom the Good Samaritan can closely identify. In adults, models for appropriate behavior are also found in the national heroes they choose to emulate.

On the national level, we continue to have our *idols of consumption*—those bigger-than-life images on the screen, tube, or field of play whose accomplishments fill our leisure hours with music, comedy, and drama.

But there is now a new breed of national hero as well. Today, we have *idols of activism*—individuals who are admired and revered not for their ability to keep us entertained but for their courage to take active charge of their own lives and the lives of others. In the face of overwhelming and impersonal social, political, and economic forces, such as the threat of terrorism, big government, and corporate malfeasance, we feel increasing admiration for those who come forward from their place among the spectators.

The September 11 attack on the United States has given us new idols of activism—firefighters, police officers, the volunteers at ground zero, the family members of victims, and our military in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 40 doomed passengers and crew on Flight 93 have been honored for their

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heroic efforts in refusing to allow terrorists to fly into the White House or the Capitol. The final words of passenger Todd Beamer on an onboard phone call to the FBI became legendary when an operator overheard him say, "Let's roll." Shortly afterwards, Flight 93 crashed into a field in a rural area near Pittsburgh, killing everyone on board. The passengers had apparently wrested control of the plane from the terrorists.

This change in our culture may have made heroes out of the cinematic images of Kate Winslet in *Titanic*, Jeff Bridges in *Fearless*, Denzel Washington in *John Q*, Ben Affleck in *Daredevil*, Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man*, Brandon Routh in *Superman Returns*, and Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible III*, but it has still made us admire the very real courage of the passengers on Flight 93.

Elevator Culture

You Really Can't Do Anything Else But Stare at the Door

Social psychologists conducted an experiment in which they gave elevator riders at Ohio State University an opportunity to help themselves to a coupon good for a complimentary Quarter Pounder with cheese. After entering the elevator, riders saw a poster reading “Free McDonald’s Burger” and a pocket underneath it in which coupons for one Quarter Pounder were located. All they had to do was take one.

Fifty-six people entered the elevator alone. Of this number, 26 were randomly permitted to ride without other passengers, 16 rode with one other passenger, and 14 rode with two other passengers (all of the other passengers were really confederates of the experimenters who decided on a random basis whether subjects rode with 2, 1, or no other riders).

Results obtained in this experiment showed that individuals riding alone were much more likely to help themselves to a coupon for a cheeseburger than were riders in the presence of other passengers. In fact, of those individuals riding by themselves, 81% took a free coupon. With one other passenger present, however, only 38% took a coupon, and with two other passengers present, only 14% helped themselves to a coupon.

Why would elevator passengers avoid doing something to their advantage—taking a coupon for a free cheeseburger—just because other riders were present? The answer seems to involve the influence of elevator culture—a set of unspoken, unwritten rules of behavior that are widely shared and generally observed by people in elevators who ride with other passengers. The riders in this experiment were eager to avoid doing something that might call attention to themselves in the public setting of the elevator, even if it meant

sacrificing a free fast-food lunch. They didn't want to be deviant; they desired to avoid being embarrassed; they didn't want to look different.

Actually, there isn't very much you can do that is right in an elevator, especially if you are among strangers. Almost all of the rules of elevator riding seem to be proscriptive—things you are definitely not supposed to do. The only prescriptive—positive—rule involves standing quietly while facing the elevator door, and that is precisely what most passengers will do. Unless they want to be regarded as weirdos, most riders avoid talking to anyone they don't know, staring at anyone, touching anyone, and even breathing on anyone (they wouldn't want to violate the personal space of other riders, even in a crowded elevator).

One interesting thing about elevator culture is that it extends far beyond the elevator walls. Actually, almost any public setting—whether walking on the streets of a city, eating in a restaurant, or sitting in the park—carries a set of rules that severely limit the quality and quantity of social interaction: In all of these places, there is little, if any, talking to, touching, or even looking at strangers. As a result, strangers in a big city who are physically close might as well be miles apart as far as interaction is concerned.

Of course, individuals also have some control over their culture; they don't passively have to conform to it. In an early study of conformity, Solomon Asch (1952) studied a group of eight people, in a classroom situation, who were asked to match the length of a line drawn on the blackboard with one of three comparison lines drawn on an index card. All judgments were made out loud and in order of seating in the room.

Actually, only one participant in the Asch study was a naive subject, and he voiced his judgment after hearing several other students state theirs first. (These others were confederates of Asch who had been instructed to respond incorrectly when asked to match the length of the lines.) Over a number of trials with different groups, approximately one third of the naive subjects made incorrect estimates in the direction of the inaccurate majority—in other words, about one in three conformed. But when a lone dissenter gave support to the naive subject by going against the majority judgment, the rate of conformity dropped dramatically to less than 6%.

Thus, if even one person waiting in line for a table in a restaurant starts talking to other customers, he or she might serve as a role model for other customers to imitate. Who knows? Maybe lots of people will take a chance and get involved in the conversation. And if one rider in a crowded elevator has the courage to take a coupon for a free cheeseburger, everybody might conceivably end up having lunch on McDonald's.

Making Monsters Into Celebrities

Popular Culture Is Saturated With Images of Infamy

Jack Levin and James Alan Fox

More than 30 years ago, when he predicted that everyone would someday be world famous for 15 minutes, even Andy Warhol could not have foreseen the astounding rise of celebrity as it would come to pervade turn-of-the-century mass culture. In response to the growing influence of the entertainment industry, a new genre of “star” biographies, gossip columns, magazines, television programs, and souvenirs—saturated with images of “mega-fame” and “mega-stardom”—has established itself in America’s popular arts.

At the same time, it is nothing new for Americans to single out certain of its most virtuous members for special attention. Not unlike the residents of other Western nations, Americans have lavished celebrity status on a range of human beings considered exemplary or extraordinary, including military leaders, politicians, business leaders, scientists, entertainers, and leading sports figures.

In America’s recent preoccupation with celebrity, however, the most villainous figures—those who have committed particularly repulsive and despicable crimes—are being granted the same sort of celebrity status traditionally accorded to heroes. A recent example occurred in October 2002 when, over a period of three weeks, two snipers shot to death 10 innocent people in the Washington, DC, area. Even before 42-year-old John Muhammad and his 17-year-old partner John Lee Malvo had been identified and apprehended, they were already dubbed “the Tarot card killer” on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. Moreover, not to be “scooped” by its

competition, *U.S. News & World Report* similarly reserved its cover story for the “I am God” message found scrawled on a Tarot card at one of the snipers’ crime scenes. Leading newspapers further deified the DC snipers by using their arrogant statement as their “quote of the week.” Given such a memorable and glamorized depiction, the DC snipers Muhammad and Malvo are sure now to take their place among the many other serial killers who have become household names—the Son of Sam, the Green River Killer, the Hillside Strangler, and the Unabomber, to name only a few.

The around-the-clock media saturation surrounding the DC sniper case was not without justification, of course. Even though the print and electronic media may have been criticized for their excessive coverage, news journalists still performed a vital function, at least for those who lived in the area that for weeks was enveloped by fear.

While a killer is on the loose, poised to strike at any moment, it is not only the right but also the responsibility of the mass media to inform a terrified public about a clear and present danger in their midst—about the latest details concerning the killer’s movement and the progress of the investigation. But transforming a serial killer into a national celebrity is surely another matter entirely. It may even inspire him to take more lives, to enlarge his body count, so that he can maintain and enhance his stature as a national superstar.

Serial killers appear quite aware of their media impact as well as their celebrity. Lawrence Bittaker and accomplice Roy Norris tortured and murdered a string of teenage girls in 1979 in Southern California, dumping one mutilated body on a suburban lawn to encourage media coverage.

After Bittaker was caught, he signed autographs from his prison cell, “Pliers Bittaker.” Clifford Olson, who raped and murdered 11 children in British Columbia in the early 1980s, begged to be referred to as “Hannibal Lecter.” In order to justify his desired position as the “grand champion” of serial murder, Olson actually confessed to slayings he could not possibly have committed.

Becoming a popular-culture celebrity is an important part of the motivation that inspires serial killers to continue committing murder. Once they are identified with a superstar moniker, their frequency of murder increases. No longer satisfied with obscurity, they seek to prove that they deserve the superstar status to which they have been assigned. Los Angeles’s 1984–85 Night Stalker, Richard Ramirez, reportedly said to one of his victims as he assaulted her, “You know who I am, don’t you? I’m the one they’re writing about in the newspapers and on TV.”

The damage done by granting celebrity status to serial killers goes beyond motivating their evil deeds. In addition, it helps inspire other ignored and alienated Americans to become copycat killers in order to achieve their own degree of infamy. Making monsters into celebrities teaches our youngsters—especially

alienated and marginalized teenagers—a lesson about how to get attention. “Want to be noticed? Want to feel important? Simple. Shoot lots of your classmates. Then, you’ll be on the cover of *People* magazine, you’ll be interviewed by CNN, and you’ll make headlines all over the nation, if not the world!”

On February 2, 1996, for example, in the obscure town of Moses Lake, Washington, Barry Loukaitis, a 14-year-old student at Frontier Junior High who had long been teased, shot to death two classmates and his math teacher. The fact that a 14-year-old boy could commit multiple homicide at school was so abhorrent that it sparked a national orgy of media coverage, inspiring a string of copycat multiple murders, which included tragic episodes in such unlikely places as West Paducah, Kentucky, Pearl, Mississippi, Jonesboro, Arkansas, Springfield, Oregon, Littleton, Colorado, and Santee, California.

The copycat effect may be particularly strong for those teenagers around America who have suffered humiliation, if not physical abuse, at the hands of their insensitive classmates. Some alienated youngsters come to view school snipers—like Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris who shot and killed more than a dozen classmates at Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado—as their heroes. After all, they had the guts to take matters and guns into their own hands and strike back against the nasty bullies and mean-spirited teachers. Even more, they’re famous for it. Like other schoolyard killers, Klebold and Harris received a massive amount of media attention, albeit posthumously. Their images now appear on “trenchcoat Mafia” T-shirts, referring to the name they had given their small group of misfits, nerds, and outsiders at Columbine High. Although adults may look at the image of a school sniper plastered on a magazine cover and consider it the ultimate humiliation for the youngster and his family, many children, in their immature view of the world, may instead consider the youthful assailant as a big shot. Those high school students in small-town America who had been teased and bullied were inspired by the shootings they watched on the network newscasts and in the headlines.

The Virginia Tech massacre of 32 students and faculty in 2007 seems to have received much inspiration from the early rampage of Klebold and Harris through Columbine High. Seung-Hui Cho was given a model for achieving a sense of power and importance through the barrel of a semi-automatic. In order to secure his place in infamy, the Virginia Tech killer sent to NBC News a set of photos he had taken of himself, portraying him as a powerful and dangerous person, certainly not someone to be ignored.

It is no coincidence that so many of the tragic school shootings were committed by teenagers residing in obscure areas around the United States. These were areas of the country that had felt immune to what they regarded as

big-city crime. Unlike large cities whose residents had taken measures to reduce juvenile violence, small towns and suburbs had not prepared for the onslaught and were caught totally off guard.

Along with sociologist Jason Mazaik, we recently studied the 1,300 covers of *People* magazine published over its first 25 years. During the 1970s, only one killer was featured on its cover. In the 1990s, by contrast, *People* printed more than two dozen different cover stories about vicious killers.

Its readership of 36 million weekly makes *People* magazine an especially influential form of American popular culture. Yet to single out this magazine for criticism would be unfair and inaccurate. To an increasing extent, violent criminals are gratuitously being featured in places where we used to place our heroes. Through the Internet, it is now possible to buy action figures, calendars, trading cards, and T-shirts bearing the likenesses of such despicable killers as Ted Bundy, the law student who killed dozens of women in several states; Jeffrey Dahmer, the cannibal who strangled to death and consumed 17 men in his Milwaukee apartment; and Andrei Chikatilo, the Russian serial killer who took the lives of 53 people. Dahmer has also been featured in a comic book depicting him engaged in sexual acts with his victims (who are in fact identified by name).

Moreover, there are individuals who are so fascinated with serial murderers that they will purchase any item associated even remotely with a killer's hideous crimes. Bricks taken from Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment building were considered by some as prized souvenirs. Even before his execution by the state of Illinois, the self-portraits painted by John Wayne Gacy, who killed 33 men and boys, were sold for as much as \$2,000 each.

And Richard Speck's oil paintings went for \$3,000—only because he had murdered eight nurses in Chicago. Danny Rolling, a serial killer who murdered and mutilated five college students in Gainesville, Florida, coauthored (with his adoring girlfriend) a book of sketches and poetry: Like many other murderers, Rolling even has his own Web site.

Unfortunately, Americans seem to have become infatuated with infamy. Some have suggested that scandalous celebrities serve a social comparison function for audience members who work out their own moral issues by speculating about the personal lives of the "stars." This is, however, not the whole story. By granting celebrity status to villains, not only do we add insult to injury by further denigrating the memory of the victims, but we may be inadvertently providing our young people with a dangerous model for gaining national prominence and fame. We may also be giving to the worst among us exactly what they hope to achieve—celebrity status. One serial killer made this intention and his frustration known when he asked in a letter to the local police, "How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?"

FOCUS

✧ Suggestions for Further Reading ✧

Many of the ideas and evidence found in “The Immaculate Americans” were based on Gale Largey and David Watson’s excellent 1972 article “The Sociology of Odors” in *American Journal of Sociology*. In this article, Largey and Watson make a very strong case that olfactory sensitivities vary from culture to culture. The use of images of odor to discredit a group of people is only one form of dehumanization. For a visual version of this phenomenon, see Sam Keen’s *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (1986).

Evidence for the tremendous influence of baby boomers can be found in *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* (1980) by Landon Y. Jones. To focus specifically on women at the leading edge of the baby boom generation, I recommend Winifred Breines’s excellent book *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (1994). For a cultural-materialist view of social customs more generally, read Marvin Harris’s fascinating work *Cultural Materialism* (1979). Harris suggests that the variety of cultural behavior around the world is a result of the adaptations that societies make to their particular environments. For example, in 1487, the Aztecs suffered from a profound shortage of animal protein in their diet; they were not able to raise cattle, sheep, goats, horses, pigs, or llamas. In response, they continued to incorporate cannibalism into their warfare. After a battle, they would eat their enemies—thousands of them—as an alternative source of animal protein.

The trend toward activist cultural heroes as introduced in “The Demise of Bystander Apathy” is beginning to show up in the sociological literature. For example, Myron Peretz Glazer and Penina Migdal Glazer, in their important book *The Whistleblowers: Exposing Corruption in Government and Industry* (1989), have studied the growing phenomenon of ethical resisters—those courageous workers who expose corruption in high places. Despite harassment and a strong possibility of defeat, these whistle-blowers operate out of a sense of moral responsibility to challenge the status quo. If you are interested in learning more about altruism and empathy in everyday life, read Alfie Kohn’s book *The Brighter Side of Human Nature* (1990). He convincingly presents evidence from sociology, psychology, and biology to suggest that human beings are more caring and generous than we give ourselves credit for. According to Kohn, helping others occurs as often as hurting others. Samuel Oliner’s penetrating work *Do Unto Others: How Altruism Inspires True Acts of Courage* (2003) examines hundreds of individuals who helped rescue victims of the Nazis during Hitler’s reign of

power. Oliner emphasizes that the rescuers had a deep-rooted empathy for other people's problems that they had developed in their childhood homes. Their parents were profoundly moral individuals who often acted on their beliefs; in our terms, they were everyday versions of idols of activism.

A work by Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), analyzes both the tradition and the direction of our cultural values. According to Bellah et al., we have lost touch with our cultural commitment to community in favor of a preoccupation with rugged individualism. In the process, we have ignored the very traditions that might help us today. A related argument has been put forward by Robert D. Putnam (2000) in his excellent analysis *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

Our cultural recognition of rugged individualism (and perhaps cynicism) can be seen historically in images of criminals who have received inordinate public attention. In many cases, they were regarded as "Robin Hood" types, whose victims—banks and large corporations—were widely viewed as exploitative and unethical (Kooistra, 1989). In some cases, of course, very influential villains also received attention but only so long as they were newsworthy and only in media specializing in news of a political, an economic, or a legal character. For example, Adolf Hitler made 7 covers of *Time*; Joseph Stalin was on 12.

In "Making Monsters Into Celebrities," we examined a more recent phenomenon—that of heaping attention on the "accomplishments" of brutal and sociopathic murderers. Such villains are not noteworthy for their pervasive political or economic influence, nor are they admired because they attack victims who are themselves widely regarded as exploitative or evil. Instead, these celebrity criminals—not unlike their counterparts who sing, dance, or perform in major motion pictures—simply entertain the masses with their spectacular and bizarre criminal behavior.

Yet featuring villainous celebrities may represent only part of a larger trend in American popular culture, in which nastiness has more generally come to assume a prominent position. In the face of intense competition for sales and ratings, the producers of the popular arts, eager to capture the largest possible share of the media market, have introduced more and more horrific depictions. The old-fashioned "good against evil" morality plays are harder to locate, having been replaced by one despicable professional wrestler brutalizing another despicable professional wrestler or one miserable talk-show guest berating (if not fist-fighting) another miserable talk-show guest. Moreover, TV reality shows like *Fear Factor* play on the sadistic impulses of audience members who delight in the suffering of contestants.

DEVELOPING IDEAS

✧ About Culture ✧

1. Writing topic: Name five of your heroes from such fields as business, sports, entertainment, religion, and politics or from everyday life. Then write an essay in which you identify the particular cultural values reflected in their heroic accomplishments. To start, consider whether they are idols of production, consumption, or activism.
2. Writing topic: We have seen how much cultural clout the baby boomers have had in American society. Thinking about music, art, comedy, and television, identify some of the contributions that your generation has made to American popular culture.
3. Research topic: Let's say you are a sociologist studying the culture of your campus. Construct a one-page questionnaire to identify some of the values and practices that are widely shared among the students at your college. Then give the questionnaire to a sample of students. (To get at how values operate in everyday life, you might want to ask such questions as how many hours a week your respondents spend doing things like studying, partying, watching TV, and so on. You might also ask them to rank order certain activities—getting good grades, having a date, being well liked, or making lots of money—in terms of how important they are.)
4. Research topic: Pick up a recent issue of a supermarket tabloid—preferably the *National Enquirer* or the *Star*. Analyze all of the profiles in that issue with respect to the human qualities and problems that they emphasize. First, determine how many profiles feature celebrities.
How many of these are entertainers, business leaders, or politicians? How many would you regard as idols of consumption? Next, find out how many profiles feature ordinary people who do extraordinary things. How many were Good Samaritans? How many performed miracles or great acts of courage? How many would you regard as idols of activism?
5. Research topic: Taking September 11, 2001, as a dividing point, compare the celebrities on the covers of *People* for the 12-month period before versus after the attack on the United States. This will probably require going to the library and photocopying more than 100 *People* covers. Be sure to discard any cover that does not feature a particular individual—that is, a cover that contains several celebrities all given equal emphasis or a cover that does not feature human beings. You might hypothesize that the September 11 terrorist attack caused Americans to focus more on our traditional heroes rather

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than criminals. If so, then, in comparison to the 12-month period prior to September 11, you would expect to find fewer murderers, rapists, and other criminals on the cover of *People* in the year following the attack on America.