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In the quest to discover our humanity, it is imperative that we explore and understand what makes us uniquely human. Although the social groups we form are not unlike other social mammals, the threads that hold these groups together appear to be unique among living members of the animal kingdom. These threads consist of a common language, a set of beliefs, rules and behaviors that members of the social group adhere to. Together, we call these threads culture and there are as many variants of culture as there are social groups. Each social group incorporates their own unique assortment of ideologies, doctrines and codes of conduct that vary widely across the continents and regions inhabited by the human species. But we must ask ourselves why these social groups are so different among members of the same species.

It is evident that separate social groups of other animals exhibit reasonably similar behaviors, yet human behaviors can be wildly contradictory between separate social groups. For example, why do Jews and Muslims from the Middle East not only refuse to eat pork but denounce the pig as unclean, while the *Maring* and other peoples of the South Pacific gorge themselves on pork and treat pigs as members of their families? Or why do Hindus in India worship cows as sacred allowing them to roam freely and refusing to eat them even during famine, while North Americans and Europeans not only eat cow regularly, but will even tie up an infant cow for its entire existence so as to keep the meat tender before slaughter?

In his book *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*, Marvin Harris attempts an explanation of these and other cultural riddles by researching the material conditions at the genesis of the behaviors. For each riddle, he postulates an economic or environmental rationale for the cultural taboos, anomalies and behaviors. These rationales seem perfectly logical, as he attempts to utilize the scientific method in a social setting by explaining cultural differences through evolutionary social science.

In Harris' estimation, Jews and Muslims from the Middle East despise pork not merely because it is unclean, but rather due to the fact that when the original Hebrew religion was at its beginnings, massive deforestation was taking place in the region. This meant that the pigs could not dine on their normal diet of nuts, fruits and tubers. This also meant that people would have to feed the pigs food that they might eat, making them a competitor for resources. Further, pigs are not easily herded, as sheep and goats are, nor are they a good source of milk. Moreover, pigs need shade to keep cool. As the trees dwindled, they lacked significant sources of food and had to roll in mud to keep cool. Thus they would appear unclean, not to mention *piggish* – gorging on food intended for humans. Meanwhile, halfway across the planet in New Guinea, the *Maring* people and others in the South Pacific love their pigs so much that they may even sleep with them. Their lives revolve around the successful breeding of many pigs before most are slaughtered for a great feast, the *kaiko*, held at the onset of war to win allies, show their prosperity and honor their ancestors. In fact, the cycle of pig raising, slaughter and war "...adjusts the size and distribution of the...human and animal population to conform to available resources and production opportunities." (1974:48). This is due to the fact that, among many other material reasons, deforestation is not a problem in the

heavily forested islands of the South Pacific, therefore pigs are able to roam freely in search of food.

Like the Jews and Muslims with pork, Hindus in India have a taboo on eating beef. This however is not due to the uncleanliness of the cow, but rather due to the fact that the cow is incredibly productive to the family farm. The cow not only gives milk, it also provides fuel for cooking in the form of its dung. The cow may also calve; producing more cows for fuel and milk, as well as male oxen to pull plows allowing farmers to plant crops when the monsoons come. Furthermore, cows in India are allowed to roam in search of food, thus eliminating the effort of the family to feed them. If a family loses its only cow, the farm is finished and they must leave their lands in search of wage labor in a densely populated and poor country.

Thus, there are earthly explanations to these and many other taboos and beliefs which claim to come from divine sources. Harris believes there is a material explanation for all cultural behaviors and he calls this theory cultural materialism. It is a theory that is heavily based on scientific and evolutionary principles. Essentially, cultures adapt their ideologies to environmental conditions. Cultures would apparently arise from material necessity and presumably thrive due to their adaptation to natural forces. Though not explicitly stated in this particular work, one can surmise that cultures adapting to these natural phenomena survive and those that do not adapt become extinct, just as biological organisms do. Though the term is not mentioned in this book, we can presume to call this process cultural selection, after its biological counterpart natural selection.

Although this process we are referring to as cultural selection seems perfectly reasonable, it is also completely unprovable. The lack of a mechanism that might implement these beliefs is one of the theory's shortcomings. Harris fails to mention how these particular cultural adaptations would survive while others, such as Middle Easterners who do eat pork, would not. There is little historical evidence for the genesis of the cultural norms. It is unreasonable to assume that all of the people in the Middle East stopped eating pork merely because someone told them to. Who came up with the idea? How and why did millions of people decide to adhere to the idea? Was it coercion by the ruling classes, a simultaneous shift in mass consciousness, mere common sense? Harris lacks a satisfactory answer to such questions, though he points toward the former. A common sense ban would arise from the fact that if everyone ate pig, there would be no food left for the society to continue due to the high resource cost of pork production. Assuming it were a common sense ban, there is no reason to assume that some privileged members of the society with the means to do so would not continue to eat pork. "The Middle East is the wrong place to raise pigs, but pork remains a succulent treat. People always find such temptations difficult to resist on their own." (1974:44). Thus coercion by the religion must intervene. "Hence Jahweh was heard to say that swine were unclean...Allah was heard to repeat the same message...Small scale production would only increase the temptation. Better...to interdict the consumption of pork entirely..."(1974:44). But religious edict does not exist independently of society. It is doubtful that Harris believes that the Bible is the literal word of God. Someone human created this rule. Thus we return to the question of who

created the rule and why did everyone else decide to adhere to it. Harris does not address this question.

Archaeological evidence cited in the Harris work suggests pork was not a staple food at any point in Middle East, though it was consumed, compromising 5% of the animal food remains in one prehistoric village (1974:43). Perhaps there were not many pigs in the area; perhaps they were not well suited for domestication or the climate. None of these reasons would necessitate a cultural ban. There is no reason why members of the society with the necessary resources to keep pigs would not continue to make them 5% of their animal diet. Harris unsatisfactorily points toward continuing deforestation in the region as an explanation. If casual pork consumption continued in the Middle East, wouldn't individual families be able to keep one or two pigs for a yearly feast? If there were ravenous pork eaters in the Middle East, could they not merely attain resources depleted in pork production by raiding non-pork eater's herds or farms? Perhaps they could trade pork meat for grain. Would it not also be perfectly reasonable to assume that perhaps a hypothetical Middle Eastern pork eating culture became extinct due to other reasons? Perhaps there was a flood or a drought unrelated to their pork eating that wiped out the members of this culture. Perhaps the non-pork eaters killed members of this culture for their pork eating beliefs, as some Hindus do Muslims for eating cow, before their culture became widespread. There are a myriad of possibilities as to why a pork eating culture did not develop, or rather did not survive into the present day Middle East. Likewise, there are many other possibilities for Harris' explanations of other cultural behaviors.

Harris should be applauded for attempting a scientific explanation of these cultural phenomena. However, his endeavor to apply the scientific method to an all-encompassing theory of culture leaves many questions unanswered. His explanations read not unlike Socratic dialogues where if you agree with variable *a* and *b* then variable *c* must be true. The problem arises when Harris fails to satisfactorily prove *a* or *b* and neglects to mention variables *d*, *e*, *f*, *g*... etc. By ignoring other variables, such as a hypothetical pig eating Middle Eastern culture, and methods by which to implement culture, such as how to convince a society to not eat pork, Harris struggles to convince the uninitiated. He is utterly convinced of his own dogma, stating boldly in a later work that he is "...arguing for the superiority of cultural materialism..." (1979:x) over eclecticism, or the belief that "better scientific theories will result from the use of more than one strategy per problem." (1979:x) By using only one strategy, Harris has failed to imagine or discover other possibilities and scenarios that might lead to greater truths. There is no doubt that Harris' theory of cultural materialism is an essential tool in uncovering the mysteries of human culture, yet to insist that one theory can explain everything is not unlike insisting that there is but one god. His argument reads as a disagreement between religions, believing one god is superior to all others. It is essential to appreciate the intricate mosaic that is human culture, not to argue for the superiority of one tile over another. If it is indeed possible to explain culture through one theory, one need take all variables into account, not merely brush aside other possibilities in favor of one's own biases. Perhaps had Harris done this, we would indeed become believers in his mono-theoretical model.

Reference Page

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