Culture: The Not Too Tender Trap

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Culture Against Man (Random House, New York, 1963. 509 pp. $7.95), by Jules Henry, shows that Henry is a gifted, intuitive observer of the contemporary American scene. And, as has often been noted, intuition is no small attribute for the scientist. The book was over 6 years in the making, during which time Henry applied his substantial knowledge of anthropological and psychiatric theory to a series of research projects which have "shaped" this manuscript, and thus his interpretation of our national character. His research in three areas of American life has carried him into homes that have produced psychotic children, into hospitals or homes of "human obsolescence" (depositories for the unwanted aged), and into the world of the adolescent (the school and "T. P. T."—"Tight-Pants-Teen-Town"). What he sees he does not like. With harrowing efficiency he exposes "new varieties of destruction." And Henry is no ordinary writer; his style is an able weapon in the arsenal he employs in attacking our culture.

Anticipating some of his critics, Henry writes in his closing pages, "It is . . . argued that whoever criticizes without making suggestions for improvement ought to keep quiet. This seems to me like saying that a person who cannot make a roast should say nothing about one that is served burnt." He candidly states that for most of the conditions he "deplores," such as the competitive motivational techniques used in the elementary school, he "perceives no immediate possibilities for change. . . ." Further, one reason he omits recommendations for changes is that such deplorable educational practices as the competitive motivational techniques do actually prepare children for the kind of world with which they must deal.

Thus, Jules Henry has written "a passionate ethnography" and, as he himself observes in the preface, "writing . . . commits one's soul—often far beyond what one ever imagined possible." The result is an angry but controlled social criticism with a minimum of suggestions for change. Man is caught in his self-created and not too tender trap—culture.

Henry begins with an interpretation of our institutions and values. He finds that an economic foundation sets the values and the character of our time. He examines the works and words of the *talking chiefs* of our society, the men from Madison Avenue. He concedes that their works are great—so great, in fact, that they have inverted the usual relation between needs and culture. For in contemporary America, society must continually create needs in order to sustain the culture. "Create more desire" is the "first commandment" of the era; and the accompaniment is "pecuniary truth," "pecuniary psychology," and "pecuniary philosophy." The reason why we are dominated by the pecuniary is that a "driven" quality permeates our society and compels all its members. It is that constellation of psychocultural traits which, for Henry, add up to "technological drivenness," and which explain each and every pattern of American society.

Occasionally the analysis falters, as Henry wades into areas where his knowledge is limited. Education is one such area. His description of the educational process as the inculcating of the culture pattern has much merit. But when he attempts a finer scale analysis from his strictly external vantage point—that of the anthropologist—Henry seems to commit the same kind of blunder for which anthropologists berate naive observers of alien cultures: if the latter are often ethnocentric, then we must say that Henry at times becomes discipline-centric. To cite just one example, his excellent analysis of creativity in the schools is severely handicapped by the fact that he is not aware of what creativity means in educational discourse. In a stylistically fine but logically fuzzy sentence, Henry uses originality as a synonym for creativity and defines it as "different from what is given." He then argues that the school "has no choice" but to pass on what is given. The weakness of this analysis is that in education, *creativity* is not defined as he has defined it. When the term is applied to thought, creativity, to an educator, can and does occur as the child learns his cultural inheritance, or precisely "what is given." The educator is concerned with the individual's thought process rather than with the originality of the cultural product.

Naiveté of a similar sort appears in other connections and, unfortunately, may serve to alienate readers who stand to gain from this book. For example, some of Henry's conclusions with respect to education are almost refreshingly innocent of several thousand years of discussion. And educators may respond with little more than a yawn when long-recognized fundamental propositions in their field are discovered and reaffirmed by Henry.

At such junctures, *Culture Against Man* can be deemed "creative" only in the educator's sense, hardly in the anthropologist's. Yet, if there are serious flaws in the discussion of education, the book also contains much of value. When, for example, Henry turns a Freudian analysis upon the Freudian-inspired teacher, he is at his best; and the result is an insightful and devastating account of the damage done in numerous classrooms. The author scores that pedagogical stance for which the stock-in-trade is "sweetness and light," the teacher's major function that of loving children. Such a conception, he asserts, leads both teacher and children to a false and hypocritical demonstrativeness which, in the end, is nothing but "a phantom commitment on which no one can collect."

A second major focus of the book is on the home that builds serious emotional problems into children. In the well-labeled chapter, "Pathways to madness . . . ," Henry concludes that severe aberration is actually little more than a caricature of what we view as normal—"an extreme expression of the cultural configuration." He asserts that parents create environments of "lethal cultural influence," and he shows how it is the culture that consolidates the

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disturbance in the child. By means of what Henry calls "delusional extrication," parents are able to "half believe their children are not present," humiliatingly seeing the children as "nonhuman objects." When such a tendency is combined with others that Henry names—communication problems, a "flight from crisis," and mutual withdrawal—madness results.

The final study is of those "disoriented children" who are the aged of our society. And again, Henry faults the culture. Like the psychotic children, the aged have come to see that they are not valued for themselves. And the cruelty of our institutional handling of these elderly discards makes it plain that obsolescence is a sin. Henry concludes that this group's tragedy is really the tragedy of us all, in microcosm. It lies in a tremendous "*yearning after communication with no real ability to achieve it.* In this," he adds sadly, "we are all very much like them."

The view that what accounts for the whole also explains its parts must, of course, follow from Henry's thoroughgoing commitment to the theory of cultural configuration. His consistent holism dictates that it is the entire cultural system which causes, and thus which must be brought to bear in understanding, any single situation or condition. The relations of parents to children, of adolescent to adolescent, and of the productive to the obsolete all are determined by "the system" as a whole. The entire cultural configuration, dominated by the "pecuniary philosophy," affects in a major way all other aspects of the culture and society. The dishonesty that this philosophy introduces into impersonal, institutional dealings is no less influential in setting the pattern for interpersonal relationships, for it is the system as a whole that compels and explains its various segments.

In an assessment of Henry's book, this configurational approach becomes both a strength and a weakness. To the extent that one agrees with it, the theory that the cultural configuration as a whole is determinative of all serves as an asset. And surely it is a theory with a great deal of plausibility. But if we view the configurational claim as a *theory*, then we cannot credit Henry with it. For, as theory, the view was elaborated some 30 years ago by Ruth Benedict, who was Henry's professor at Columbia University. *Culture Against Man* adds little to the original theory. Can the book be viewed, then, as an extension of the theory, or as lending it further confirmation? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be no, and the reason lies in the way Henry went about his book. ". . . *I do not use research as proof* in any rigorous sense" and "*I discuss data as illustrative of a viewpoint and as a take-off for expressing a conviction*" are statements in the introduction to *Culture Against Man.* And there is little in the book that would challenge them.

Unless one is of that school of thought wherein a societal analysis can be verified simply on the confirmation of the "man in the street," one has doubts about conclusions based on this sort of procedure. Ruth Benedict quite explicitly espoused this means of verifying an analysis—the agreement of the man in the street stands as sufficient evidence—and it would appear that Henry, as her student, has also accepted it. With all due credit to Benedict, most contemporary views of adequate methodology do not sanction such procedure.

Other logical difficulties further serve to undermine Henry's analysis. His use of the concept of "national character" as a construct for the analysis both of the United States as a nation and of a hospital for the aged may add even further to the present confusion regarding this concept. And his semihopeful view that "culture, in creating a conflict, provides also an attempted solution," will jar some readers, because here culture mysteriously becomes self-active and self-corrective.

Yet with all this, the book must be rated highly on the basis of the insight in Henry's observations and interpretations of the American scene. Its very considerable value lies in the intuitive insights the author brings to his studies of institutional segments of our society, and in his reiteration that drivenness, affluence, and emotional starvation are overarching themes in our lives. Henry's gift of intuitive insight makes *Culture Against Man* a highly provocative source of suggestions for inquiry, and, as such, I would recommend it to social scientists and others. But so powerful is the book that the reader, who is apt repeatedly to be tempted to agree with what Henry writes, should be warned that he must ask constantly, "How does the book validate or increase the degree of confirmation of the numerous propositions that it makes?"

Science of Decision Making

A Manager's Guide to Operations Research. Russell L. Ackoff and Patrick Rivett. Wiley, New York, 1963. x + 107 pp. $4.25.

Operations Research in Research and Development. Proceedings of a conference. Burton V. Dean, Ed. Wiley, New York, 1963. xii + 289 pp. Illus. $8.50.

Operations research as a science of decision-making is less than 25 years old. By some standards, a quarter of a century is a mere speck of dust in the space of time; but such a scale seems inappropriate for a reasonable specification of how long it might take to communicate a new idea. Viewed in this perspective, it may or it may not be surprising, depending upon individual tastes, that until now an accurate, concise, and nonmathematical picture of the nature of OR had not been drawn. The need for clarification was never in question. The ability to achieve it was another matter. In fact, no such book could be written until the field of operations research had gained ample experience and the kind of confidence associated with maturity.

The Ackoff-Rivett book represents the first serious attempt to communicate, without the use of mathematics, a synthesis of the structure, philosophy, and accomplishments of operations research, not just an omnium-gatherum of facts, cases, and techniques. The publication is addressed to those individuals whose activities motivate them to understand and probably use OR. This certainly includes the community of managers and administrators that OR is dedicated to serving. Being concise and nonmathematical, the book is likely to find a receptive audience, and it should help to dissipate whatever veil of confusion presently surrounds the use of operations research.

The book should also interest the scientific community of which OR considers itself a member. In the first place, it provides an excellent history of this field. Second, the authors discuss two environments in which OR has grown up, and they compare experiences in Great Britain and the United States when such differentiation appears to be relevant. The authors are in a unique position to achieve this result. Ackoff is a past president of the Operations Research Society of America, and Patrick Rivett is president of the United