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AMERICA'S CULTURE

continents. Given the differences in the populations which began to develop after 1521 (the date of Spain's conquest of the Aztec civilization: the first permanent settlement of Europeans on the mainland of the Americas) and the differences in the geographies and colonial circumstances of these post-1521 societies in the Americas, a variety of new cultures began to develop on the North and South American mainland. The enormous migration of free men and women from Europe to the mainland of the Americas during the past five centuries (the major portion of it to the United States), the much smaller forced migration of enslaved Africans to these continents in the first four of these centuries (the major portion of it to Brazil), and the free migrations from all over the world in the past two centuries constitute the largest movement of human beings in history. The kinds of migrations to Portuguese ruled Brazil, French-ruled Canada, Spanish America, and the future United States during their colonial histories, the varied policies for governing these colonies, the diversely enculturated native populations the European colonizers encountered and interacted with in the New World, and the different geographies where the four colonizations occurred have been the principal factors in forming the four major post-1521 cultures in the Western Hemisphere.

But if we are to understand these distinctive cultural histories, we must of course first understand what culture is. A remark in a *New York Times* obituary on June 23, 2014 (page D14) that the deceased "loved American culture, particularly Hollywood movies, and especially Westerns" is useful to understanding this basic question because it epitomizes the common mistake nowadays of confusing popular culture with culture. The two are not the same. Popular culture is a society's tastes in entertainment, food, manners, and personal adornment which of course fluctuate from generation to generation and not uncommonly

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even within a generation. Popular culture is self-conscious and unstable. Culture, however, is stable; and its beliefs are normally acted on without the self-consciousness that characterizes popular culture.

Cultural beliefs are slow to form but once formed are long-lasting. They are the opposite of fashionable. Cultures have inertia. They resist change. Cultural beliefs unite all generations of a society. They even unite generations no longer alive with the living generations of a society. A culture serves the inherent human need for a common denominator of right behavior. Having such a denominator minimizes social conflict and makes it possible for human beings to live together in ongoing society.

Culture may be formally defined as a unique set of beliefs formed and transmitted through behavior from generation to generation. Cultures satisfy the deepest human need there is: to know moral right from moral wrong. That is an altogether different kind of concern from such ephemeral matters as whether to get a tattoo and what colors and design it should have and where to place it on the body, whether to get a tongue, lip, nostril, ear, or eyebrow piercing, or knowing the most up-to-date styles in music or what kind of clothing should be worn and manners adopted to be a member of the camp known as “cool”—the sorts of self-conscious concerns which typify popular culture.

The need to know moral right from moral wrong distinguishes human beings from other creatures. Our humanity requires us to live and act in society with other humans on the basis of some shared, stable set of belief-behaviors; and cultures serve that need by providing a right way to behave. A society’s cultural beliefs and the behaviors which express them serve the natural interest every society has in maintaining itself as a society. In contrast to any other species, human beings have both a moral imagination and a propensity to *choose* to live in a wide

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range of geographies. These traits in conjunction with each other have produced an amazing variety of cultures.

Cultural beliefs are formed and transmitted by imitating the behaviors of the older generations of a society which embody them. As each successive generation comes of age and imitates their elders' conduct, this rising generation learns the cultural beliefs expressed in that behavior and thus participates in and perpetuates the culture. But only after a belief has been acted on for a minimum of four successive generations does it attain the historical validity that gives it cultural authenticity. To claim that a fondness for Western movies made in Hollywood is "American culture" is to confuse a taste for something trivial and transitory with something human beings must have to live together in society for many generations: namely a shared, internalized sense of right behavior.

Why are four generations needed for cultural beliefs to acquire their characteristic historical validity and compelling authority? The answer to that question requires us to examine how the sense of history arises among human beings. Let us suppose that a group of human beings has, for whatever reason, stayed together for four consecutive generations. It is the fourth generation of that incipient society which acquires the sense of history that is essential to a culture's validity and authority, because the fourth generation comes of age without personal knowledge of their great-grandparents: the initial generation of the group which has died off leaving behind their children (the grandparents of the fourth generation) and that generation's children (the parents of the fourth generation). The fourth generation acquires a sense of history—that is to say, the sense of a way of life before they were born—through hearing stories told by their parents and grandparents about the first generation, which those generations (the second and third) knew but the fourth generation did not. The reverence manifested in these

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stories for the no-longer-present generation, plus other signs of respect for the dead, convey to the fourth generation the sense that the conduct of their parents and grandparents (which they are beginning to emulate) belongs to a historical way of life. As more generations come of age, act, grow old, and die, leaving behind further generations of descendants, the historical sense in that society grows stronger.

Once a society has formed a set of historical beliefs through this process, a culture exists, and its authority can supersede the blood kinship which may be assumed to constitute the basis for all primitive human groups. A set of historical belief-behaviors is as effective in attaining social unity for a group of human beings as the blood ties of clan membership. Eight generations—another complete repetition of the four-generation behavioral cycle—may be required to form a fully compelling set of cultural beliefs.

Culture, then, is essentially a set of right beliefs which are right because they are historical. The shortest definition of culture is this: Historically Validated Right Behavior.

The formation of a culture resembles the formation of a path. The first person to traverse a landscape decides how to go through it by making choices among plausible alternative routes. Travelers who come along after the pathfinder tend to follow in the track of his decisions for two reasons: one, it's easier to follow a discernible track than to make an entirely new path; second, the pathfinder's choices will have practical value. As time passes and more and more travelers use the path, it becomes so plain and smooth that it acquires a compelling authority as the way to go through that landscape. A path is a way to go that has physical utility; a culture is a way to live that has social utility. A culture is the way of life which the behavior of many generations of a society has endowed with moral authority.

Over time, of course, the conditions in which a culture has