

An Outsider's View of American Culture

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A frequent visitor to America, Professor Mucha compares his European idea of the "city" to what he discovered in the United States. The immediate and informal cordiality of Americans is also discussed, as is urban anonymity, the profane naturalness of violence, patriotism, education, ethnocentrism, and the American potluck dinner.

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It is quite difficult to look at American culture with a fresh eye. One can easily become bewildered or upset, especially if one comes from a country where America has been treated as something special. And, in my case, having an education based on American sociology, cultural anthropology, and social psychology, having read all the classics of American literature, and having watched many movies, both classic and modern, directed by both foreigners and Americans, confusion about the culture persists. Further, this being my

fifth time in the United States, having lived for months in big cities like Chicago and New York, in small towns like Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and South Bend, Indiana, I have had an opportunity to view, firsthand, the diversity of American culture.

Having the experience mentioned, liking America, and being rather flexible, I see how one can easily lose the sense of novelty of first contact and view this initial contact through later experiences. Ultimately, one too easily begins to treat everything as normal; one attempts to understand everything, perceive the causes of everything that is going on, and frame one's observations and experiences into some structural and functional context.

Nothing bewilders or upsets me in America. After all these years I still see things that are different here than they are in both my native Poland and the many other countries that I have visited. Unfortunately, these observations are neither novel nor original: They are, or at least should be, obvious to many people, foreigners and Americans alike.

I love nature, but I am a city boy. I was born and raised and had lived for forty years in Cracow, a medieval university town of a half million inhabitants in southern Poland. An urban environment is very important to me. This is something I miss in America. The idea of the "city," as I conceive it, hardly exists in America. My idea of "city" can be found in parts of three American cities: San Francisco, New York, and New Orleans. There is a noticeable lack of an urban environment in America. I do not refer here to the fact of the deserted, burned-out, or depopulated parts of cities. I have noticed many empty, run-down apartment houses that would be put to good use in Poland. What I refer to is the physical and social structure of the towns and cities of America. It is the exception in America to have the excellent public transportation found in Vienna, Paris, London, and even Warsaw. In many American cities there are not even sidewalks: The people rarely walk, so why invest in sidewalks? If one jogs, one can use the street or roadway. American drivers understand the use of the roads for exercise and, unless a driver is drunk, there's not much risk.

Not only are there no sidewalks, there are no squares where people can safely gather, meet other people, talk, or buy flowers. There are no coffee shops like in Vienna, Rome, or Budapest. If you want coffee, you must drive to McDonald's or go to a restaurant. If you walk beyond the environs of "downtown," or the shopping mall, you will most likely be stopped by a police officer who will, if you are white, offer to assist you. But how can the officer be of assistance? Can he or she give you a ride to a real café? Can he or she return you

to the “downtown” that, after dark, is most often both unsafe and deserted? There is no such thing as a real theater, and the movie theaters are back at the shopping mall, far removed from the empty downtowns of America.

Numerous sociologists and cultural anthropologists tend to identify American urban life with anonymity, the lack of primary groups and face-to-face contact, with only superficial and formal relationships. How do I see America? I have experienced a lot of friendliness and kindness in America. Everyone wants to help me, to thank me for calling or for stopping by. Everyone seems to care about me. When I make new acquaintances, including the dental hygienist, everyone addresses me by my first name, and I can be certain that he or she will make every effort to pronounce it as correctly as possible. Very soon, I discover that I am learning many intimate details of the personal lives of the people I have just met. I find myself a bit embarrassed, but I doubt that they are. They become my friends so quickly, and as quickly they begin to share their problems with me. There are, in the English language, the nouns *colleague*, and *acquaintance*, but I do not discover them to be in popular use. In America, when one meets someone, he or she immediately becomes a friend. Does this mean, for instance, that you can expect to be invited to his or her home for dinner or to just sit and talk? Absolutely not. I have often been invited to dinner, but perhaps I have been fortunate in meeting a different type of American. My brother, who teaches Russian and Polish at a Texas university, had not been invited to anyone's house for dinner during the entire academic year. My American friend, who teaches history in a New England college, had not been invited to anyone's home during her first year in the small college town. Therefore, I am forced to conclude that quality friendships in the sense of lasting, intimate, emotionally involving relationships are more difficult to develop.

In reference to the anonymity of urban life, as I have mentioned earlier, urban “life” hardly exists. There are neighborhoods, however, and “urban villagers” reside therein. Is this anonymity a feature of these neighborhoods? I do know, at least by the faces, everyone who lives in my own neighborhood in South Bend. If I do not recognize someone, I can tell whether that person “belongs” to my neighborhood. If a nonresident is in the neighborhood, he or she will be singled out immediately. It is possible that a patrol car will stop and a police officer will kindly ask the stranger to produce identification. A black person obviously cannot rely on anonymity in a predominantly white neighborhood. Neighborhoods do not want anonymity. The neighbors, in this instance, want to know everyone, to be able to address everyone by his or her

first name, to be able to say “hello,” and to ask how one is doing. And, as I’ve learned, they prefer the answer to be brief and positive: “I am fine, thank you.”

An obvious reason for this fear of urban anonymity is the problem of security. However, the lack of anonymity does not imply that the relationships are truly friendly in the deeper sense of the word. The neighbors know each other, but they do not visit each other’s homes to sit and talk, to exchange recipes, to borrow household tools, or to help if the automobile is not running. In this age of telephones, neighbors do not ordinarily just stop by unexpectedly.

American society is famous for the brutality of social life. The high rate of violent crime is incomprehensible. Rapes, female battering, child abuse, and molestation are the lead stories for local television and the print media. This information about violence has many positive consequences. If we wish to fight something, if we want to prevent crime, we must be aware of it. However, the constant forced awareness—the information on why and how someone was killed or raped—accustoms Americans to violence. They treat it as something natural, as just another case of a person killing or being killed. Violent death or abuse belongs to the profane, ordinary world of America. There is nothing sacred about it, unless it is the residual fear that it can also happen to you. On the other hand, death of natural causes is almost completely removed from everyday lives. Old people die in nursing homes or hospitals, and even this type of death, in being generally ignored, does not belong to the sphere of the sacred.

The fact of violence in everyday American life has numerous social consequences. One consequence is the decline of urban life. Americans have now accepted the fact that downtown areas, after dark, belong to the criminals or misfits. Americans accept the fact that strangers may be dangerous. Americans, thus, try to avoid downtown areas and strangers, especially at night.

Patriotism is another feature of American life that appears to differ from many European countries. I have been exposed to patriotism for the greatest part of my life. However, Polish patriotism, or nationalism, is different. Poland was, for forty-five years, under Communist rule, which was, to some extent, accepted, although the majority of Polish society treated it as alien domination. The Communists monopolized the use of national symbols. In the mid-1970s, the ruling party made it illegal to use these symbols without special permission by the state authorities. I can recall the unauthorized use of national symbols only within the religious context. I have never seen a Polish national flag in a private residence. Only once in my life did I see an eagle, the Polish national symbol, in a private residence. From my interpretation,

the old national symbols became identified with a state that was not treated as the true embodiment of the national institutions. In America, state and nation are symbolically identified, and, moreover, nearly everyone feels the necessity to emphasize his or her identification with nation or state. I will not elaborate on the yellow ribbons in evidence during the Persian Gulf War, but it seems to me necessary to mention the presence of the American flag in most residences, offices, and clubs I have visited. Further, Lions Club lunches, university graduations, basketball games, and so on all begin with the singing of the national anthem.

Is there anything wrong with these public displays of patriotism? I do not believe so. However, the use of national symbols on an everyday basis has, in my opinion, two questionable consequences. First, the meanings of these symbols are shifting from the sacred to the profane, ordinary, everyday sphere of life. Second, the public display may indicate a strong degree of ethnocentrism. Excessive patriotism, pride in country and its achievements, may signify—and I am convinced that this is true in America—a very strong and blinding conviction that the American ways are much better than the ways of other countries and peoples. After all these years, after all these arrivals and departures, and after all these meetings with many Americans in Poland and in other countries of Europe, my impression is that American people, especially as visitors to foreign areas, are friendly but arrogant. They are arrogant in the sense that they do not understand non-American customs and habits, they do not even try to understand, and they are convinced that other customs “must” be much worse simply because they are not American. Americans are friendly in the sense that they would sympathize with other people; they would pity them and give them advice on how they should elevate themselves . . . to become more American.

What are the reasons for this general behavior and attitude? One reason is that the American educational system does not promote general knowledge about the United States and other countries. Personally, I am not of the opinion that education is the best solution to *all* social problems. Moreover, I believe that the significance of education is often exaggerated by politicians and mass media. However, American students at the grade school, middle school, and high school levels do know much less than students their ages outside of the United States. How can students learn more if no one demands that they learn more? I used to participate in monthly faculty meetings of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at a state university. Each month, a part of the agenda was a discussion of the admission policy. Should we accept can-

didates who cannot read, write, and calculate? Eventually, we continued to accept these deficient students . . . to a university! Their knowledge of their own country is minimal and inadequate. Their knowledge of other parts of the world is practically nonexistent. This may be the foundation for Americans' deep convictions that their ways are superior. They know little of their own country and less about other countries. What little they know is evidently the basis for their unquestioned views.

Another reason for the "friendly arrogance" of Americans may be their relative parochialism. The United States is so large and diverse that it is very difficult to learn much more than something of one's own state and, perhaps, neighboring states. Geographically and culturally (regions, ethnic groups), the United States is indeed so diverse that one can travel and study it for years, always learning something new and interesting. But, from my point of view of the whole of humankind, this big and diverse nation is only one relatively homogeneous spot on a map, a spot in which nearly everyone speaks the same language, can stay at the same type of hotel or motel, eat in the same type of restaurant, and shop at the same kind of supermarket. People living in Europe have a much better opportunity to appreciate the world's cultural diversity and to become much more relativistic than Americans. Europe remains a continent of natural cultural diversity, and the differences in the European educational system help in developing a relativistic attitude toward other peoples and customs. Naturally, not all Europeans take advantage of their educational opportunities, and they too often remain as rigidly ethnocentric as many educated Americans.

A third reason why the American is generally more ethnocentric than the average European is the nature of mass media. Reading American dailies (with perhaps the exception of the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and a few others), we get an impression that the entire world consists of some extension of the United States. In weekday editions, we rarely learn of the world beyond the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, or even north and south of the nation's borders. In the case of an assassination of a public figure, a revolution, a minor war, or a significant natural catastrophe, we may learn something of the world beyond the borders. On a regular basis, we learn very little of other countries. I have discovered that educated people are not certain if Poles use the Latin or Cyrillic alphabet, if the Polish language is distinct from Russian, or if the Poles had their own army during the Communist regime. Even interested people are often of the opinion that Hungarians are Slavs and that Lithuanians and Latvians speak Polish or Russian.

These facts are common knowledge to the people of Europe, but how could Americans know these things? Schools do not teach them, and the newspapers are more interested in a recent rape in Florida than in the economic, political, and cultural situations of their neighbors in Mexico or Canada.

American television does not help much. "Headline News" and "CNN" provide information about the rest of the world on a regular basis, but the major networks do not, unless, as we discover in the print media, there is news of a sensational nature. Local television stations inform mostly on local crimes or local economic and political happenings, such as the daily whereabouts of the president or governor. For local television, the world is further restricted, ending at the borders of the county.

Every teacher can provide many examples of the blatantly inadequate knowledge of many Americans about the world beyond the country. I offer two examples. An intelligent female student in a course, Principles of Sociology, was very active during the discussions and once volunteered to present a report based on a selection from Émile Durkheim. She came to me before the presentation and complained that it was too difficult. She had happened on a foreign word, *solidarity*. She was even unable to pronounce the word correctly. She did not understand and was curious to know why Durkheim had used the word, which was coined much later, somewhere in Eastern Europe, to describe a political movement. She could not recall the context in which she first learned of the word and, further, in her own town, there was no such thing as "solidarity"

A second example is about another intelligent female, a minority student enrolled in my course, Race and Ethnic Relations. After two weeks of the semester she came to me with a problem: How is it possible that some other students are able to answer some of my questions about racial and ethnic situations in the United States if these particular issues were not presented in the textbook? She was very sad because she knew everything about her town and actually believed that nothing was different than it was in her own social milieu.

During my current visit to the United States, I have, in addition to teaching at the university, been studying a Polish community in a relatively small town. Both as a university professor and as a researcher, I participated in many parties of a more-or-less formal nature that were organized by individuals and various institutions. Nearly always, I went to these parties with my wife. Two things stand out from these gatherings. One was the way people greeted us. Sometimes we simply said hello, but most of the time we shook hands. But, by "we," I mean only myself and the host. Never that I recall, during the entire year, was my wife offered a hand in greeting or farewell. At the

beginning, she was quite offended but then began to accept it as a local custom. I am certain that no one intended to offend her. Everyone was friendly to both of us. Why was she treated differently? Was it sexism? I inquired to learn if someone could explain and was told that this was a kind of custom. We do have different customs in Poland.

Another thing that surprised me was that private parties, but not formal dinner parties, were nearly always of the potluck character. The guests were expected to bring their own beverages and specialties. This does not happen in Poland. One may bring flowers (in the United States, women seemed to be deeply embarrassed when I brought them flowers) and/or a bottle of wine, vodka, or brandy. *No one* brings food. The host would be offended. But in America, not only do people bring food but they can take the leftovers home. Many years ago, the first time I experienced this custom, I did not know what to say. I had brought a bottle of very good Polish vodka to an American friend, but it was too strong for the participants of the party. The people tasted it, perhaps out of courtesy. When I departed, the host gave me the bottle, nearly full, to take with me. For a long time I did not know if I was given a message that I had brought something bad or improper. The next time, I brought a six-pack of beer and we drank all of it.

There was an additional surprise in store for me. My wife and I organized a potluck party for my departmental colleagues. One couple brought a homemade cake. Because they had to leave earlier than the other guests, they asked my wife to give them what remained of their cake. My wife was shocked. The fault was clearly mine. I forgot to tell her what to expect.

When I studied the Polish-American community, I participated in more formal dinners, as well. Some dinners were held by upper-middle-class associations of men and women. Sometimes, but rarely, these dinners were organized in restaurants. Mostly, however, dinners were served in large Polish-American clubs. Participants were dressed up: Men, mostly professionals or from the business community, were in suits; the women wore elegant dresses. The “equipment” was of a different nature. The tables were simple, the table cloths were of paper, and the plates were paper or plastic, as were the glasses. There were no separate plates for dessert. Dessert was thrown on next to the roast beef and potatoes. After dinner, the disposable plates and glasses were rolled into the table cloth and discarded. After dinner, coffee was drunk sitting at a Formica table.

This is obviously an example of American efficiency and convenience. Paper table coverings and plastic plates, knives, forks, spoons, and glasses are

always in evidence. Now, here in America, we have potluck lunches at work, and now my wife and I also use the products of American chemical expertise when we throw a party. The difference is that, for us, the use of the fake stuff is a problem, especially when the real stuff is so readily available. And, having noticed the dish-washing machines in most of the private houses, we are further confused.

I am led to wonder. American ingenuity, from all quarters addressed to laborsaving devices, serves to free its citizens from the tedious and time-consuming labors of everyday life. This provides free time, perhaps more free time than available in any complex, industrialized society. Why don't Americans devote a portion of this free time to learning something more about the world within and without their own provincial borders?

Study Questions

1. What are the major human and structural differences that Professor Mucha discovered between American cities and cities in Europe?
2. How does the author justify the contention that "urban 'life' hardly exists"?
3. What may be an interpretation of American public displays of patriotism?
4. What is implied as the consequences of "friendly arrogance"?
5. What are some of the reasons why the author found Americans to be ethnocentric?
6. How does the potluck dinner differ from European dinner party customs?

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