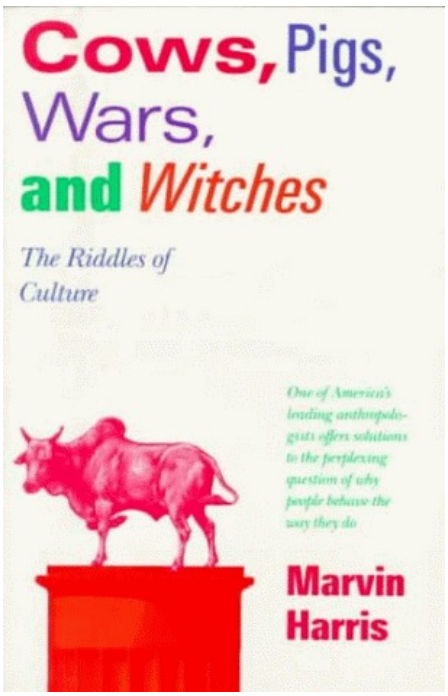

Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture

Marvin Harris

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This book challenges those who argue that we can change the world by changing the way people think. The author shows that no matter how bizarre a people's behavior may seem, it always stems from concrete social and economic conditions. It is by isolating and identifying these conditions that we will be able to understand and cope with some of our own apparently senseless life styles. In a devastating attack on the shamans of the counterculture, the author states the case for a return to objective consciousness and a rational set of political commitments.

Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture Details

Date	:	Published December 17th 1989 by Vintage (first published December 1st 1974)
ISBN	:	9780679724681
Author	:	Marvin Harris
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Genre	:	Anthropology, Nonfiction, History, Sociology, Science, Religion

From Reader Review Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture for online ebook

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

There are several reasons why I wasn't going to review this book. One, I am not an Anthropologist. I took some anthropology courses in college, but contrary to the opinions of some of the undeservedly arrogant, Newsies-hatted forever-virgin dudes in my Philosophy I course, that doesn't make me an expert or automatically mean anyone cares what I have to say (loudly, and with so much "ergo", so much "thusly") on the subject. Two, despite the fact that this book is slim, it is pretty much huge-mongous-full as far as content is concerned, enough so that covering it all would require a much longer review than I assume pretty much anyone is willing to read. Two leads into three, the fact that leaving something out or (inevitably) explaining something insufficiently is basically like setting out a saucer of milk for the trolls. Given the argumentative stance of the author, and the fact that things like socioeconomics, cultural materialism, counter-culture v. science, and The Dreaded Religion Debate are directly addressed, and that I found myself generally agreeing with him on these matters, I am basically begging to be yelled at by strangers. And masochistic I am not. Then I thought "Hey, this is my little corner of the internet. I don't have to be an expert on the Yanomamo to publicly conclude that their culture is horrifyingly misogynistic and backwards any more than I have to be a published author before I can write a book review on goodreads."

Stating overt disapproval of cultural practices which are at direct odds with basic Human Rights does not make you ethnocentric. Tracing spiritual beliefs and practices back to rational, pressing earthly concerns like food, land, and the perpetuation of the species does not make you the Antichrist. Non-believers like Marvin Harris and the differently-believing-from-you have every bit as much right as believers of various faiths do to study and discuss with authority any and all religious beliefs. Just ask Reza Aslan.

I am going to attempt to outline some highlights of this book. Said outline will not encompass the entirety of the arguments set forth in this book, because this review is not the book, and I am not Marvin Harris. I've made it moderately clear where I stand in relation to Harris' views, and so will henceforth attempt to just be surgical, though opinions will most likely slip in to my summary because that's what they do. Please don't hit me.

…*even the most bizarre-seeming beliefs and practices turn out on closer inspection to be based on ordinary, banal, one might say "vulgar" conditions, needs, and activities. What I mean by a banal or vulgar solution is that it rests on the ground and that it is built up out of guts, sex, energy, wind, rain, and other palpable and ordinary phenomena.*

With that, Harris goes on to explore and link, amongst others, the following "riddles" of various cultural and spiritual practices around the world.

Mother Cow: Why do Hindus have a spiritual ban on the consumption of cattle meat? Harris concludes: India is a family-farm based economic system with too high a population and too small an industrial infrastructure to support a meat-packing industry like we see in America. Many families have no more than a couple of cows, these being their mainstays, the sources of milk, energy (via their droppings), more cows, and power to plow their farms since tractors aren’t exactly falling from the sky. Even when a cow is dry or ill for seasons at a time, it would be certain death to the small-scale farmer to sell its meat for food, since there's still a chance of recovery and/or impregnation. If one were to go through India and swoop up all the "useless" cows in order to grind 'em up for food, a massive influx of farmers and their families would be

forced into the already overburdened cities looking for work which simply does not exist at sufficient levels. The long-term result would be greater poverty and class division. A spiritual ban on cow consumption is basically an insurance policy that the lower-classes won't make the short-sighted decision to take their shit to the pawn shop.

Pig Lovers and Pig Haters: Jews, Muslims, and early Christians adapted the view that swine is filthy and inconsumable due to pigs' similar, competing nutritional needs to humans. Given the arid terrain and constant movements inherent to the war-torn history of monotheism in the biblical Holy Lands, pig farming was impractical bordering on dangerous. On the opposite end of things, the Maring of Papua New Guinea have the appropriate climate for pig farming, and will breed them to excess for about a decade at a time, up to a point where they risk losing too much forest, at which time they will slaughter almost every single one in order to conduct a giant feast in search of tribal allies. Wars will be fought and lands will be conquered, leaving the tribes with new patches of forest for slash-and-burn farming. During the time that new farms are being set up and preparations made for the next great feast, the old farms will be granted a sufficient resting period so that they may be re-conquered and reused decades later. A religion-based truce is established during this time, guaranteeing that the cycle is allowed to continue unabated, to the benefit of all.

Potlatch: The Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island were known to conduct a sort of ceremony referred to as "potlatch", in which tribal elders competed with one another to show off their wealth and greatness by giving it away to the competition. Coming from different pockets of land with varying animal life and naturally limited huntable populations, this constant back and forth chest-puffing pretty much guaranteed not only that resources would not be drained from certain areas, but also that a trade system would be established creating a healthier and more versatile diet, as one elder may show his wealth in animal furs and meats, while the other may use foraged fruits, vegetables, and dried fish. A natural cycle coinciding with the seasons is additionally created, ensuring consumables year-round.

Messiahs/The Prince of Peace: Probably the most controversial sections of the book concern themselves with the roots of military-messianic beliefs and the eventual adoption of a non-violent spiritual figurehead, i.e. Jesus Christ. Harris argues that constant warfare between pockets of ostracized Jewish people and the all-powerful Romans led to the embracing of multiple warlord Messiahs who manifested themselves as means to rally soldiers to fight for land and goods being taxed from under them by their pagan oppressors. Harris believes that the non-violent Christ figure later embraced by Christianity was actually just such a militaristic messiah, and that his modified image was an attempt on the part of some Jewish peoples to separate themselves from the violent rebels in order to avoid direct conflict with the Romans. I could go on and on about these thought-provoking sections, but damn this review is already sooo long, and these chapters are definitely the meatiest of the bunch. If nothing else, I recommend at least checking out this chunk of the book.

Broomsticks and Sabbats/The Great Witch Craze: Basically, the argument here is that witches were used, particularly throughout The Inquisition, as a means to create* a sort of spiritual scapegoat for the ills of the time, in order to save the Catholic Church/State from blame for crop-failures, severe weather, over-taxation, large-scale class division, etc. The Church created an Evil Force which only it could conquer, thus terrorizing the impoverished masses into distraction from the real source of their various sufferings: The Church. That doesn't sound familiar at all, right? You absolutely could not look back on history with this framework and replace the word "Witch" with: Jew, Gay, Democrat, Terrorist, Atheist, Immigrant, Pro-Choicer, Communist, etc, etc, etc. Smokescreens by resourceful magicians. Add to that confessions elicited through torture, and you have yourself quite the patsy.

*I say "create" despite the fact that there probably were cases of people who believed themselves to be

witches who traveled on broomsticks to Sabbats. Harris explains why this belief may have existed, and where the broomstick thing came from: Trippy Dildos. Basically, a psychedelic herbal concoction similar to the one used by Carlos Castaneda was applied to a stick and vaginally inserted for maximum and more immediate effects. Yes, some of these ladies "traveled to Sabbats" much like so many of the more experimental people I've known have had stimulating English language conversations with their pets. Meaning they didn't.

The final bits of the book deal with counter-culture's embrace of pseudo-science and Eastern spirituality, of defiance of the scientific method in favor of internal transcendentalism. Given that Harris wrote this book in 1974, he does come off a bit "damned hippies" bitter, though his point still holds water. To say that political and social responsibilities are transient, superfluous earthly matters, and that changing the way you thiiiink maaaaan insiiide yourself about yourseeeelf maaan is all it takes to exist in the world in a meaningful way, is beyond just missing the point. To him, the counter-culture movement is and was just another manifestation of spirituality ruling out in favor of rationality, and that the rejection of science when it comes to human behavior, particularly through blanket cultural relativism, is dangerous and irresponsible for all concerned.

And that is a "summary" of Marvin Harris' book. Whether you agree or disagree with Harris' stance, you will still find so much fascinating information here which begs for additional reading, I promisepromise you that. Side note: what's up with the Harrises and their reason and their science and their non-religious stances? Sam Harris, Marvin Harris. It's Harris-y! Badum-chiiii.

If you read this entire review, you are a fucking saint and I love you forever, even if you're about to leave a really mean comment. Also, sorry.

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thethousanderclub says

One of my favorite quotes regarding culture comes from an ecclesiastical leader named David R. Stone. He said:

"Our culture tends to determine what foods we like, how we dress, what constitutes polite behavior, what sports we should follow, what our taste in music should be, the importance of education, and our attitudes toward honesty. It also influences men as to the importance of recreation or religion, influences women about the priority of career or childbearing, and has a powerful effect on how we approach procreation and moral issues. All too often, we are like puppets on a string, as our culture determines what is 'cool.'"

I am fascinated by culture, the own I am a part of and the various ones around the world and throughout history. Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches by Marvin Harris is a book written just for me. All of the books I have read that have dealt with culture in one way or another, whether that be The Hero with a Thousand Faces or People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture, has had enough interesting things to say that I

felt they were worth reading, even if I didn't agree with some portions of them. Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches falls in that same category--interesting, thoughtful, sometimes right, and sometimes wrong, in my opinion.

Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches selectively explains, but the author purposefully mentions his intent is not to explain everything, a few cultural attributes that existed in the world at different periods of time and attempts to give a reasonable and rational reason for their being a part of the culture. Harris does this with a fine academic mind and from a secular perspective. More often than thought, I was able to follow the author's reasoning and understand, at least, the conclusions he came to and how he got there. At other times, such as his explanation of the true character and history of Jesus Christ, left me scratching my head. I have read the New Testament four times, and I was highly skeptical of some of Harris's interpretations and conjectures. There is plenty here to discuss and debate.

The book ends with a commentary on the culture of Harris's time, which was several decades ago, that took some of the momentum away from the book since it was so topical for the time it was written but no so much today. I enjoyed Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches because it gave me plenty to think about. It also proved to me, once again, how much we don't know as opposed to how much we do. Culture is deviously complicated, but Marvin Harris's attempt to explain it is interesting enough to be read.

http://thethousanderclub.blogspot.com/

Sandra says

4.5

Jose Carlos says

ABURRIDA CUADRATURA DEL CÍRCULO

Dice Marvin Harris, en las primeras líneas de su libro, que “trata de las causas de estilos de vida aparentemente irracionales e inexplicables” y crea en el lector la falsa expectativa de que el autor será, verdaderamente, capaz de desvelar semejantes misterios. Bien pronto, se viene abajo el horizonte de expectativas creado, pues tras un enorme aparato teórico y práctico, en donde se levantan un sin fin de teorías avaladas por estudios y observaciones, resulta que el objetivo del libro, aclarar esos enigmas, queda disuelto en la parafernalia y el lector compone un gesto de decepción y escepticismo puesto que no termina de comprender lo que ha leído y, lo que es peor, para qué y el porqué lo ha leído.
Vayamos por partes: en primer lugar, el capítulo titulado La Madre Vaca, creo que es un claro ejemplo de esas falsas expectativas que provoca el libro en sus lectores. La verdad es que uno se relame ante el planteamiento inicial de que alguien, al fin, vaya a ser capaz de explicarle a uno los motivos por los cuales las vacas sean sagradas en la India, de que aunque sus habitantes se mueran de hambre no se las coman, y otros tópicos de ese estilo relacionados con el culto: es cierto, la ignorancia que hemos desarrollado como lectores ante ciertos aspectos de la vida se basa en la incomprensión de ciertos tópicos de otras culturas, como el hecho de que los occidentales o europeos no podamos entender cómo se puede comer perro o termitas, aunque este sea otro asunto, que por cierto insinúa varias veces el libro, pero que tampoco trata con la profundidad que sería deseable.

De entre las mayores decepciones del libro, el capítulo dedicado a la vaca en la India ha sido una de las mayores, dado que yo albergaba, junto al relacionado con el cerdo y por otros motivos particulares, un interés especial. Si partimos de la equiparación de la Vaca (con mayúsculas) a nuestra Virgen María, está claro que las expectativas en obtener una explicación lógica y plausible se han difuminado. Después, Harris, despliega toda una retórica que le lleva a dar vueltas en círculo sobre el culto a las vacas y cómo se refleja eso en el día a día de la gente –sin duda, interesante-, pero que no aclara el porqué de los motivos, lo que está esperando saber el lector –o al menos lo que estaba esperando conocer yo-. Porque no me vale con saber que la vaca "es el símbolo de todo lo que está vivo", como una aclaración al problema. Luego, ya entramos en las libras, en la producción de mantequilla, en la función económica, en que hay pocos bueyes en relación a las vacas, en el "ecosistema", en la importancia de los excrementos del ganado vacuno, en la agricultura mecanizada y en toda una serie de lugares comunes que, si bien pueden aportar una visión de conjunto, a mi no me terminan de aclarar el porqué, en la India, no se comen a las vacas.

Un par de referencias a Gandhi y su amor por las vacas y una conclusión peregrina, antisistema y antiglobalización, ecológica y fuera de lugar ("de hecho, el calor y humo inútiles provocados durante un solo día de embotellamientos de tráfico en Estados Unidos despilfarran mucha más energía que todas las vacas de la India durante un año") por lo que tiene de redundante e incluso de hipócrita y oportunista (¿la vaca sagrada interpretada como el automóvil de hoy es acaso una conclusión de calado antropológico?), pone el desilusionante colofón a este capítulo del que, sin duda, esperaba mucho más.

Por semejantes líneas argumentales discurre el segundo apartado, Porcofilia y Porcofobia, del que también, y dada mi intensa convivencia con la comunidad judía durante años –sin yo pertenecer a ella, pero como un mero observador que muchas veces no acertaba a comprender lo que veía- despertaba en mi un gran interés. Por ello, la afirmación inicial de que tanto un extremo como otro (el odio o el amor desmesurado por el cerdo) interpretada como un supuesto de "hábito alimenticio irracional", ya despierta en el lector español, país en donde se vive una auténtico culto al cerdo, ciertas reservas. Nuevamente, "el enigma del cerdo", tal y como sucedió antes con la incógnita de la vaca, no será realmente despejado. Y además, para hablar de los fanáticos de los cerdos no era necesario recurrir a exóticas civilizaciones de Nueva Guinea, Melanesia y el Sur del Pacífico, tan sólo habría que fijarse en Guijuelo, por mencionar algún lugar de nuestra geografía patria.

Los motivos de la condena hebraica y coránica a los cerdos se entronca con motivos anteriores al Renacimiento, se intenta equiparar la supuesta suciedad de los cerdos con la de las vacas señalando que pese a ello, estas últimas son sagradas en la India (volviendo a no aclarar esos motivos por los cuales son sagradas y a los que se dedicó un fuego de salvas en el capítulo anterior), y termina amparándose en algunas de las teorías medicas de Maimónides. Es una lástima que Harris no especifique que Maimónides era cordobés, y por ende, durante un tiempo establecido en un país donde los cristianos tenían autentica pasión por el cerdo y donde el hecho diferenciador cultural sería eso, el rechazo musulmán al cerdo… pero bueno, esto es sólo una teoría mía. Discípulo de Averroes, esgrimió en su Guía de la Buena Salud diversas prácticas para favorecer la digestión; algunos preceptos de Maimónides (por otro lado una figura clave del pensamiento de la época con su Guía de Perplejos), nos indican que, sobre algunas cuestiones médicas, su conocimiento era extraordinariamente medieval y habría que pensarse el citarlo de forma ejemplar en ese campo, por muy médico que fuera en la corte de Saladino.

El ántrax, la posibilidad de que el cerdo trasmita la tuberculosis –olvidándonos de la triquinosis- el nomadismo hebreo, los chascarrillos acerca de expresiones como "sudar como un cerdo" que bien poco aportan a la solución del enigma, contribuyen, una vez más, a sacar la cabeza caliente y los pies fríos, sin solución posible al misterio y con la impresión de que Harris está elaborando una especie de encaje de bolillos argumental sustentado en nada.

En este sentido, particularmente irritante resulta el capítulo titulado La Guerra Primitiva, una reflexión sobre la irracionalidad del conflicto edulcorada con unas indigestas fórmulas de Rappaport y unas cuantas referencias a los maring y los yanomamo. Sin necesidad de recurrir a esto, Todorov y Sebald obtienen unas conclusiones mucho más relevantes y sustanciosas en sus ensayos, privados de tanto academicismo.

Para mí, el capítulo más interesante del libro es El Potlach, una buena reflexión sobre “el impulso de prestigio” de los aborígenes de la isla de Vancouver, toda una exposición de los motivos humanos del orgullo, el agradecimiento, el desagradecimiento, el estatus y la envidia, sazonados con algunas anécdotas francamente ilustrativas como la del buey, y una leccioncita sobre la “reciprocidad” de enorme interés.
No querría acabar esta reflexión sobre el libro sin hacer referencia a los capítulos dedicados a las brujas, ubicados al final. Si bien resultan quizás de lo más entretenido (y por cierto me sorprendió encontrar entre las citas y en la bibliografía final a un historiador como Hugh Trevor-Roper, que yo exclusivamente conocía por sus estudios sobre el nazismo), en muchas ocasiones caen en lo anecdótico y en lo más sórdido de la persecución a la que fueron sometidas. Si bien eso también ocurre en el clásico de Caro Baroja sobre las brujas (por cierto citado por Harris entre la bibliografía final), creo que en el libro del español hayamos mucha mayor información y reflexión acerca de cómo se persiguió, y porqué, a las brujas. Aunque ni siquiera sé si era este semejante objetivo de Harris.
En conclusión, Marvin Harris se propone darnos unas explicaciones a una serie de enigmas (desde los alimenticios, pasando por los religiosos, para alcanzar los culturales) que ni de lejos alcanza a explicar. Amparado, o más bien debería decir parapetado, en un estilo alambicado y aburrido (cuya parte de mérito no niego a su traductor Juan Oliver Sánchez Fernandez), Harris nos convence de que va a ser capaz de demostrar la cuadratura del círculo antropológico y, lamentablemente, al final de la lectura, sólo él parece creerse el haberlo conseguido. Y tampoco es que lo haga con mucha fe si nos atenemos a ese exordio final, a modo de epílogo, con el que nos penaliza.

El libro, que pretende pasar por serio y riguroso, es un tostón la mayoría de las veces, pero no tan dañino como el de Barley, aunque no explique ni aclare absolutamente nada de lo que promete en su personal cuadratura del círculo pedante y aburrida.

Federico Sosa Machó says

Otro interesantísimo texto de Marvin Harris, con puntos particularmente altos en lo referente a la guerra (y la violencia asociada a los varones) y las brujas. La perspectiva antropológica es el materialismo cultural, y los esfuerzos se encaminan a mostrar cómo costumbres o prácticas aparentemente incomprensibles o caprichosas responden en realidad a causas que tienen que ver con los sistemas de producción, variables económicas o intereses políticos. Como en otras de sus obras, Harris es ameno, escribe de manera clara y no se requiere formación científica en la materia para disfrutar de sus removedores planteos que iluminan el pasado, claro, pero también el presente.

John David says

Civilizations, even the most advanced among them, are invariably strewn with mythologies, folklore, and recherche taboo. While the contemporary United States would itself provide enough material for a multi-volume study of this kind, Marvin Harris focuses mostly on pre-scientific and pre-literate peoples to answer questions like: Why do Hindus not eat cows, while Jews avoid pork instead? How do you explain the concept of the Messiah? Why was the belief in witches in medieval Europe so prevalent, and why were people so afraid of them? These bald facts have received many anthropological and sociological explanations in the past, including the one that suggests that they are simply irreducible and, therefore, unable to be analyzed. But Harris, a Marxist by conviction, necessarily must see a materialistic explanation. He looks for answers to these questions in the everyday lives and concerns of the people that entertain these beliefs.

Because of this, his answers, in most instances, seem to have some bit more explanatory force than those that have preceded him.

According to Harris, the reason why we see Hindu “cow love” (his words, not mine) as odd is because we live in a very fundamentally different position with respect to cows in our day-to-day postindustrial lives. No matter the exigencies or problems in the lives of the market or our family, we can always go to the grocery story and purchase milk, butter, and meat all from a cow. However, Hindus (and he is mostly talking about Indian Hindus here) have acquired the need for an adaptive resilience in its agricultural order that we have long since shed our need for. Hundreds of millions of Indian peasants who have only one cow know that animal as the only source of milk to make it through a dry season. And if they are lucky enough to make it, it is the only thing that can pull a plow once it is time to plant or harvest crops. In short, because of the way their economy is localized around the family unit instead of our food-industrial complex, they place a different value on the cow.

Another topic Harris considers is the first-century Palestinian Judaism with its concomitant messianism. The history of this period, mainly through Josephus’ two reliable books “Jewish Antiquities” and “Bellum Judaicum,” informs us that Jesus was not unique in having the mantle of the Messiah. Between 40 B. C. and 73 A. D., Harris mentions Athrongaeus, Theudas, an “anonymous scoundrel” executed by Felix, a Jewish Egyptian “false prophet,” and Manahem. Josephus was so used to this political apocalypticism that there are even more of these figures that he does not even bother to name. A long line of Jews fashioned themselves as restorers of the Jewish state and wished to free it from the caprice of Roman satraps, with Jesus and John the Baptist being the two whose names have survived the ravages of history.

Harris’ explanation of witchcraft is appealingly commonsensical. During the early middle ages, witchcraft was not especially looked highly upon, but was never considered heretical. Over time, the Church found that they could use these beliefs to scapegoat hailstorms, outbreaks of disease, crop failure, and other ominous signs, therefore stopping people before they reached the heterodox conclusion that God might be involved in all of these negative circumstances, too. Instead of the Catholic Church wishing to root witches out of society, they used the common folkloric beliefs in sorcery to the Church’s advantage. By co-opting sorcery as a heresy, the Church was able to blame the evils of society on its more marginal, “lower” members, while at the same time seeming to want to keep both the Church and society pure. Two birds with one stone!

I can certainly appreciate the broad appeal a book like this has for non-specialists and non-scholars. That having been said, if I could change one thing about this book, it would be that Harris had taken a less flippant approach and more fully fleshed out his sources, or had a full bibliography. Off-the-cuff expressions like “cow love” and “pig hate” really tend to draw away from the authority that Harris has proven through his other work he rightly deserves.

Jesus (Ego) says

Es sorprendente este libro. Marvin Harris enlaza muy bien temas que a priori no tienen mucho que ver pero con hilo conductor que se va entendiendo conforme avanzas. Aborda algunas costumbres, mitos y movimientos de diferentes culturas y grupos sociales a lo largo de la historia y los analiza en su sentido práctico, característica del materialismo cultural en el que suele enmarcarse el autor. Llamativas tradiciones y ritos sobre la alimentación y la guerra en diferentes grupos, Jesucristo y los movimientos mesiánicos, la contracultura americana, brujas e inquisición, etc. Me gusta mucho el estilo del autor y su capacidad de crear

atención e interés. Leeré más obras suyas.

Sarah ~ says

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Alberto says

Un libro ameno, a ratos muy interesante (para mi sobre todo en los primeros capítulos) en su propósito de divulgación antropológica. De ellos se desprende que peculiaridades culturales de distintos grupos humanos que a nuestros ojos 'occidentales' les pueden resultar chocantes provienen de adaptaciones razonables al entorno y no a una arbitrariedad inescrutable.
Lo que no me queda claro es si el autor atribuye estas adaptaciones a una o varias inteligencias individuales o a alguna especie de 'inteligencia colectiva'. Y el detalle no me parece menor, porque el caso inicial de las vacas hindúes, el del tabú del cerdo o el del 'Potlatch', los beneficios para la comunidad resultan bastante abstractos y largoplacistas, en cambio la verosímil conspiración medieval de las brujas podría tener perfectamente nombre y apellidos ya que se pueden establecer objetivos concretos.
En cuanto a la 'contracultura', al ser tratado como un tema de actualidad a mi me parece que ha envejecido mal. No digo que infinidad de timadores actuales no hundan sus raíces en ese movimiento, pero ningún farsante que pretenda hacer dinero con la 'conciencia cósmica' o similares presumirá hoy en día de pasado contracultural. Suelen irse más lejos en el tiempo y en el espacio. Y sin apoyo académico.

Bookwormdragon says

This book is required reading for my Political Science 101 class, and for once a professor has managed to select an interesting book.
This is an interesting look at some of the cultural riddles that tend to mystify Westerners - like Cow Love in India, Pig Hate in the Middle East, Cargo Cults, etc. Harris explains how these seemingly ridiculous (to us) behaviors are actually perfectly sensible and successful adaption strategies. A short and pleasant read, well researched and written. I highly recommend this to anyone who has an interest in cultural adaptation strategies or just cultures in general.

Marcos Ibáñez Gordillo says

Lectura obligada, a mi entender. Un estudio antropológico de actualidad en muchos puntos a pesar de remontarse a 1974. Se aprende una barbaridad.
Aparte, hace literalmente siglos que no leía nada desde una perspectiva de positivismo y objetividad que se mantiene al servicio de la humanidad eminentemente subjetiva como es, muy a lo siglo XVIII.

Kim says

Unexpectedly turned out to be one of the most though-provoking and fascinating cultural studies I've ever read. Everyone should have a few horizon-wideners on their book list -- this should be one of them.

Emre Sevinç says

All those religious traditions that seem utterly stupid, confounding, and sometimes surprising as well as the events in history such as 'witchcraft' whose root causes we generally don't know, is the main topic of this book. What a book such a motivation makes!

I won't give any spoilers but I want to say, if such a strong ambition to search for truth doesn't deserve respect, then I don't what does. After so many years, I've yet to come across such a book, and I keep on seeing Marvin Harris as a modern Sherlock Holmes on a grand scale. Grand in its efforts on a both geographical and temporal scale.

Josie says

I liked this book very much because it is written really well and it explains some very strange concepts,,, i learned many bizarre facts from it that i can mansplain to other people now which is very exciting.

Ivonne Rovira says

Today, while lamenting the sidelining of fiction in favor of informational texts to the exclusion of just about anything else in English classes with a friend, I mentioned that no one had ever learned to love to read by reading a textbook. However, I had to immediately correct myself by adding "except for *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* and The Day the Universe Changed: How Galileo's Telescope Changed the Truth."

I read Marvin Harris' scintillating book in 1978. Although an accessible paperback designed for a general readership, *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* provided a fabulous text for my sociology class on how abstruse actions by other cultures are not quite so inexplicable once you understand the culture. Despite being first published in 1978, it's as fresh as it was when the late Harris, then a professor at Columbia University, released it. While Westerners like to lord it over the unthinking wogs, Harris provides examples on how facile that attitude can be. For example, protecting cows and letting them wander makes sense in an impoverished India where bovines provide street cleaning by eating compostable garbage, their dung makes cheap cement, and their milk will always be available since the temptation to slaughter them for their meat is checked.

But the book isn't a stern polemic; rather, Harris presents the material in a charming and often humorous manner. *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* proves as riveting as a whodunit or one of the new YA adventure tales. The reader will forget s/he's reading what was for many years a sociology and anthropology text and

instead think s/he's stumbled on a travelogue crossed with The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights.

Alaine says

Someone recommended this to me when I first went back to school -- eight years ago! I was originally majoring in cultural anthropology. That came to an end when I realized I wasn't extroverted enough. Anyway, this book has been sitting on my "to read" list all this time. I finally checked it out. And it turns out I have no interest in reading it, at all. I can't get into the writing style, and reading a 43-year-old anthro book doesn't appeal to me.

Alex says

Why do Jews and Muslims refuse to eat pork? Why were thousands of witches burned at the stake during late medieval Europe? These and other riddles are explored by famous anthropologist Marvin Harris, and his conclusions are simple: people act within social and ecological contexts that make their actions meaningful. Put another way: cultural ideas and practices that seem strange to us may actually be vital and necessary to the people of those cultures.

Harris is especially good at explaining how societies create elaborate rituals to avoid harming the natural ecosystems they depend on, which clarifies the Middle Eastern ban on pig products. It turns out the chubby animals compete with humans for the same foods. Raising them in large numbers would place great strain a land made fragile by thousands of years of deforestation and desertification. Better to ban them entirely and not risk further ecological damage.

This logic is then extended to elucidate why the institution of warfare probably first arose in areas where it's difficult to feed large numbers of people. In Harris' words, "In most primitive societies, warfare is an effective means of population control because intense, recurring intergroup combat places a premium upon rearing male rather than female infants." Since the rate of population growth depends on the number of healthy women, privileging males by making their larger bodies necessary for combat is a way of reducing the pressure to "eat the forest." Not that male supremacy and violence is the BEST way to reduce population, just that it's one ritual societies have adapted to meet that goal.

This discussion of patriarchy leads to an exploration of class. The emergence of "big men", chiefs, and finally the State is explained as a cascading distortion of the original principles of reciprocity into the rule of redistribution. "Big men" work harder than anyone in their tribe to provide a large feast for their community - with the only goal being prestige. Chiefs similarly pursue prestige, and plan great feasts to show off their managerial skills, but they themselves harvest little food. Finally "we end up with state-level societies ruled over by hereditary kings who perform no basic industrial or agricultural labor and who keep the most and best of everything for themselves." At the root of this construction of inequality is the impetus to make people work harder to create larger surpluses so that greater social rewards can be given out to show off the leader's generosity. But only at the State or Imperial level is this hierarchy enforced not by prestige but by force of arms, to stop the poor and working classes from revolting and sharing the fruits of their labor.

The most provocative sections of the book deal with revolutionary movements that fought for this liberation,

within the context of the religious wars of Biblical Judea and Late Medieval Europe.

First, Harris tackles the Messiah complex by showing that Jews around the time of Jesus waged near-constant guerrilla warfare against their Roman rulers and oppressors. Perhaps half a million people died, in probably hundreds of Jewish uprisings, all led by religious insurgents called Messiahs. Whether Jesus was one of these revolutionary warriors is disputed, but Harris argues that the "peaceful messiah" idea only gained prominence later during Roman backlash, as a way to distinguish between the "harmless" Christians and the rebellious Jews. Later on, when Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, its emphasis shifted once more to be compatible with evangelizing the largest military on Earth as it colonized the Mediterranean and killed insurgents.

Christianity would come full circle and provide the ideological backing for revolutionary movements against the dominant social order of Europe during the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. At the time feudalism was in crisis and huge peasant movements like the Anabaptists, led by messiah-like zealots, were gaining large followings against their noble and clergy overlords. These Christian messiahs called for breaking up large land estates and providing for the poor masses, suffering from unnecessary poverty and disease. The threatened defenders of Church and State needed some kind of distraction to be cooked up to divide the population, while authorizing to executions of revolutionary leaders (who were mostly female).

Witchcraft fit the bill nicely. With the Pope's approval, the accusation, torture, and execution of hundreds of thousands of "witches" effectively disrupted the enormous peasant movements and brought legitimacy to the forces of law and order. Harris explains, "The clergy and nobility emerged as the great protectors of mankind against an enemy who was omnipresent but difficult to detect. Here at last was a reason to pay tithes and obey the tax collector."

If this crackdown on an invented evil parallels the spectre of "terrorism" today and the war on anti-American Islamist movements, then perhaps Marvin Harris' effort to explain the seemingly insoluble mysteries of distant cultures can also come full circle to help us make sense of our own society. If Washington is the new Rome, then who are the new messiahs? Or, in a secular sense, who are the people concerned for the poor majority that suffers unnecessarily in our own time?

Tyler says

Marvin Harris intends to apply scientific theory to some of the great cultural riddles of the world. Why do Hindus love cows? Why do Jews hate pigs? Unfortunately, like an evolutionary biologist trying to explain why humans have pinky toes, he comes across as making up just-so stories. The theories are plausible, but that doesn't make them accurate. The truth in a just-so story is always in what it tells us about the storyteller. In this case, he's a 1970s academic.

One more thing: Since I'm not an expert on all matter historical, I usually factcheck history books by spot-checking the stuff I do know. If Marvin Harris's account of the religious landscape of first century Palestine is any indication, then his historical research was pretty shoddy. His "proof" that Jesus was really a warrior messiah is abysmally threadbare -- four verses from the Gospels, two of which he apparently doesn't realize are parallel synoptic accounts.

I'm giving this book three stars because it kept me entertained, and gave some interesting ideas to chew on. However, I wouldn't go to it as a foundation for my philosophy or anthropology.

David Gross says

Cows are inefficiently raised and devoured in the United States, while in India, people would rather go hungry than eat cow flesh. In the Jewish and Moslem tradition, pigs are unclean and cannot be consumed; while in others, gargantuan pig feasts are more holy than the Thanksgiving turkey. Is this just part of the inexplicable side of human nature, or are there understandable reasons for these cultural curiosities? Harris shows that these bizarre displays of cultural variety play an important and understandable role in the cultures' environments.