
TAKE-OFF INTO THE NOOSEPHERE

The Cultural Creatives: Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, Harmony Books, New York.

It is true that Fritjof Capra's widely read books *The Web of Life* and *The Turning Point* are considered good science and excellent ecology, but also an expression of Capra's spiritual, if not mystical, yearning for a holistic human civilisation attuned to the biological earth. Certainly his synthesis of science, society and ecology is stunning, but again and again the reader is disconcerted by qualms that this idealism is perhaps not rooted adequately in the real world of bustling, selfish, material reality. Tomorrow morning the indices that will drive our lives are the NASDAQ averages in far away New York, the price of *parripu* and CEB power cuts. Capra's vision is marvellous and it is rooted in a reality that is not too remote, but it is nevertheless not quite at hand.

About half a century earlier Teilhard de Chardin—what jewels the Jesuit Order concealed from view for decades—in a fusion of Darwinian biology with a philosophy part materialist and part mystical, raised the question of the collective consciousness of man. In *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Future of Man*, classics of 20th Century philosophy without a reading of which an education is never complete, Teilhard broached the issue of the future of social consciousness. Grounded in scientific palaeontology and religious training he well understood the difference between consciousness and intelligence – a distinction that Arthur C. Clarke too avers to when recently asked about computer artificial intelligence in a fascinating interview reproduced in the Srilankan Airlines in-flight magazine of January 2001. What Teilhard captured appositely in his conception of the noosphere was the emergence of a collective consciousness of humankind, of the human social animal. There was a strong evolutionary-biological undertone to his thought such as, “we must enlarge our approach to encompass the formation, taking place before our eyes and arising out of hominisation, of a biological entity that has never existed before—an envelope of thinking substance.” By which he was referring to a collective thinking human entity.

A century before that there was another prognosis, one that claimed to be materialist and grounded in the science of history. It asserted that human civilisation had reached a stage of advancement that made classless society possible. It was possible, we were told, to escape from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom, meaning that prosperity and the satiation of material needs had made possible an as yet unrealised leap in social consciousness. Greed and accumulation were rooted in social conditions of want, but the immense productive powers unleashed by an epoch of capitalism had made capitalism itself redundant. Humanity was no longer inescapably tethered by dismal want, but for the iniquities of class society itself. Capitalism, the thesis held, had prepared the

ground for the abolition of capitalism, for a higher form of civilisation.

It is invigorating to read a book whose authors are unaware, or if aware are careful to refrain from any reference to, these philosophical and ideological precedents. Ray and Anderson have written a book grounded on 13 years of empirical research drawing on over 100,000 Americans and more than 100 focus groups about new attitudes and lifestyles emerging in that country. The book's principal claim is startling; a quarter of the adult US population, some 50 million adults who the authors refer to as Cultural Creatives, have to a significant degree opted out of the ideology, ethos and lifestyles of established society. Within this group there is also a core group of about 25 million people who are much more aware and committed to their choices, the authors contend.

What are the most important ways in which the Cultural Creatives define themselves? How are their lifestyles different? A simple list of their values and beliefs would include a concern with communities and neighbourhoods, a rejection of consumerism and commercialism and a distrust of corporate capitalism, a dislike of the modern culture of success and “making it,” a deep commitment to ecological sustainability and pro-environmental values, and pro-feminist attitudes at home and work. Stated more briefly, these people are turning away from the mainstream and from the market economy and building communities out of a profound period of social learning based on the everyday experiences of American social life.

Anybody who has visited America would certainly have met many people in all walks of life, and especially young people, who have turned their backs on the mainstream get-rich modernist-capitalist, or fundamentalist-traditional, or tinsel, cultures. However, what came as a surprise to this reviewer is the book's insistence (based on reams of empirical research) that this segment accounts for a full one-quarter of the population, and the assertion that large numbers of these people are conscious of the personal importance and aware of the social significance of their choices. The awareness is not that of belonging to a political organisation, activist group or ideological tendency – not many would, for example, call themselves socialists or anti-capitalist, cynical though they are of corporate business and the powers that be. Their awareness is a consciousness born out of the organic processes of their work, college and community existence – organic consciousness. A practical consciousness that wants to make the way the country lives different, but not for this reason any the less revolutionary. The Cultural Creatives consist of two currents, the social activist movements and the consciousness movements. Each in turn consists

of a variety of personal involvements, interest groups and focus movements. The first generation participants in the two currents reflect the '60s generation" (whoever said "What has become of the 60s generation?") and the more long haired and melodious '70s people," respectively. The former more concerned with social issues such as race, poverty, health-care and corporate greed, while the consciousness people accent self-awareness, psychic development, the wholeness of the personality and spiritual growth. The post-'70s second generation does not suffer from the schizophrenia that history seems to have imposed on its predecessors. Social activism and consciousness involvements blend easily in the younger generation. A broad overlap, a coming together of many currents and rivulets makes for a flood, a seminal upsurge, like November 30 1999 in Seattle.

The commitment to ecological sustainability and the willingness to pay more, to consume less, to make sacrifices for environmental values is the strongest single binding thread. The educational and class background of the Cultural Creatives is mixed, with a weighting towards college-educated people and white-collar employees, more accurately the modern working class of largely intellectual workers. A large number, however, are also self-employed in small businesses or ply specialist or skilled trades. This emerging picture makes it vividly clear that the immense technological advancement and productive prosperity of America is facilitating the emergence of more beneficial forms of social consciousness. It seems that the wag who remarked, America is the only country in the world ready for socialism, is not far off the mark.

The authors' empirical studies lead them to classify the American population by attitude and ideology into three groups, the Creatives, the Moderns who constitute about half the population and the Traditionals who make up the last quarter. Moderns, is the term that they use to describe those who accept the system, hold modernist (pro-business, materialist and pro-technology) views, are strong in their pursuit of career and money, and gung-ho switched on in their attitudes. It is not surprising to learn that about half the American population thinks like this. What they have to say about the Traditionals, small town America with conservative views, rejecting secular, modernist or liberal-radical worldviews, and including the religious-right, is very interesting. Ray and Anderson's estimate that the Traditionals constitute about a quarter of the adult population and live mainly in small towns and in certain states comes as no surprise. What is surprising is the authors' finding that this group is actually a recent counter-culture, not traditional in the sense of remnants of an old society that existed long ago, perhaps from before the Civil War. Yes a small number would fit this description but not most. Most are a reaction to modernism and the way the onward march of American capitalism has undermined small town society, eroded social stability and destroyed the fabric of communities, beliefs and cultures. The big malls have moved into town and driven the mom-and-pop store to the wall, great mechanised holdings have finished off the family farm, broken and humiliated men congregate as rednecks in a bar,

and not too long ago even lynch the occasional nigger! What is fascinating about this narration is that this is just how the eruption of fundamentalism and ethnic extremism is described in the third world. The destruction of traditional society, the collapse of the village economy, the bewildering crisis suffered by old religious and value systems, the agitation of youth, all this analysts say is the legacy of colonialism, modernism and now globalization – *gamperaliya*. However, the 20th Century capitalist world order did not only subjugate the third world to the metropolis and marginalise people in distant lands, it also subjugated its own national hinterland to the metropolis. Afghanistan's Taliban and the American religious right are of one mould it appears, both products of a frustration shaped by the destructive forces a new world order. This extrapolation, of course, is not Ray and Anderson's own, but an apparent corollary in the eyes of this reviewer.

What is most significant for the left political reader is something implicit throughout the book—the unspoken explanation it provides for the marginalisation of the post-war American left. The left remains trapped in its own narrow, specialised viewpoint – miniscule in the middle of a sea of social and cultural change. Trained to narrow its focus to political protest and theoretical disputation, overestimating the role of trade unionism, confined to dated concepts of revolutionary party building and beset by sectarian splits, the left simply missed the wood for the trees. The left ignores a former great, who paraphrasing Goethe once said, "Theories grow grey my friend, but the tree of life is ever green." But it may still not be too late. The best of the left, thanks to its familiarity with economic and state power theory and its foundation in the classical texts, has something to contribute. It is apodictic that the left must step into this sweeping torrent if it wants to be effective, it must widen and modernise its categories of thought and scope of action if it is to fit this new world.

The kind reader will perhaps forgive this already over long review, justified only by the importance of the book, if this reviewer finds just one more comment necessary. *The Cultural Creatives* by Ray and Anderson lacks an internationalist perspective. They do not discuss the threats and weaknesses, nor the strengths and opportunities, that global interdependence dictates. The United States is certainly the most important country in the world, with a prosperous economy and a strong and confident people charged with democratic traditions. It is also the attractor of the best and brightest from all over the world be it science, art or sport. Nevertheless a revolution, and I use the word advisedly, of this magnitude will fail to transform the economic and social foundations of society if it is confined to America. A creative transformation of American life must like a domino spread to Europe and elsewhere if it is to survive, and it can spread. Otherwise it will be strangled, paradoxically, by globalisation, by global interdependence. Not even the strongest nation on earth is an island separate unto itself. I do recommend *The Cultural Creatives* to readers of *Pravada* as one of the most thought provoking books published in recent years. ■

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