FOUR

America and I

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Having been a foreign graduate student at a prestigious American university, Professor Varenne reflects on differing interpretations of his own personal experiences. What others may have perceived as culture shock was anything but: There were more pressing issues, more important concerns. Now, after twenty years as a resident analyst of American culture, the professional outsider takes a penetrating look into the inside.

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Many years after I finished graduate school at the University of Chicago, a friend who had started the same year I did, said something like, "Wow, you were in quite a state of culture shock that year!" My Michigan-born wife still tells me how poignant to her are the stories I tell of my eating my evening meals by myself, alone at a big table for eight at the International House, even when a group of my peers were loudly congregating in another part of the cafeteria. After all, I tell her, they had never specifically invited me, and anyway, I did not really feel comfortable in the midst of a group that seemed so assured of itself, noisily engaging in discussions in which I could not quite take part.

By the time people gave me these interpretations of my behavior, I had thoroughly learned what "culture shock" is meant to refer to in anthropological theory, and I was well versed in all the writings that

highlight the difficulties "people from different cultures" have when they meet and have to do something together.

But that is now. Then, the time was September 1968; I was twenty years old. I had spent most of the preceding academic year in Chicago in the shadow of my parents. We had made a comfortable nest that nicely filtered whatever was radically alien. We enjoyed ourselves. As for me, the heavy stakes were back in France where the important exams awaited me. I do not remember having sweated over my application to graduate school in anthropology. No one in my kin or acquaintance had ever applied to any American university. I did not understand the honor that had been given me when I was accepted, and I had no idea of the price I would have to pay.

By October 1968, everything was clearer. I was petrified with the fear that came with the recognition that I was among a very select few and that soon we would be much fewer. I was probably frozen in a quasi-catatonic silence. I now also suspect that it would be easy to analyze conversations with my fellow students and emphasize all the moments when I failed to recognize an invitation to join a group for dinner and all the moments when my requests for an invitation were ignored.

Yet I remember clearly that interactional mismatches were not my most pressing problems. My pressing problem was making sense of Talcott Parsons and of the ways in which my professor David Schneider agreed and disagreed with what he made us read. There I was, with several hundred pages to read a week—something I had never had to do in my college years in France—and three or four important papers to write within the next ten weeks. These assignments were important in all sorts of practical ways: My scholarship was on the line, as was the support my parents were giving me and my evolving recognition that cultural anthropology was something in which I was indeed passionately interested. I may not have fully understood what David Schneider had to say, but my cultural insensitivity to his ways of saying was the least of my concerns.

Eventually, my main concern was alleviated. The year finished and my scholarship was renewed. I was on my way, and I could go for a pure vacation in France as the children of the French petite bourgeoisie always do. The following year I wrote an M.A. thesis, my proposal was accepted, I received a grant, and, after the ritual vacation, I "went into the field" in the bright yellow Pontiac convertible of my childhood dreams about America.

CULTURE SHOCK?

Can one be in "culture shock" and not know it? That depends, of course, on what one means by "culture shock," and thus, eventually, by "culture." Anthropologists generally define *culture shock* as a psychological

syndrome, an actual state of a person when he or she is first confronted with the practical recognition that people do not all conduct their everyday life the way he or she has seen people conduct it until then. I still remember the way my heart clutched when I first got a glimpse of American suburbia from the Dan Ryan expressway in Chicago. It corresponded exactly to all the pictures I had seen of it in France, but now these little one-storied houses with their open front yards on tree-lined streets were all around me. They had moved from the world of my imagination to the world of my experience. They were now "here" and not "there."

And so my heart clutched. Often, I was unable and unwilling to perform acts that were routine to most people around me. Like many who first arrive in the United States, I had problems with forms of address. I gagged on calling my professors "Paul," "Cliff," "David," "Milton," and "Vic." My professors could only be "Friedrich," "Geertz," "Schneider," "Singer," and "Turner" in reference (as they still are to me when I talk or think about them) and "Professor . . ." in address (as I have stopped doing in deference to my understanding of American cultural proprieties). Fellow students could be addressed by their first names (but I often referred to them by their last). If I overheard them address professors by their first names, I inferred a familiarity that amounted to a professional anointment: I instinctively assumed that they could do so only because they had already been told that they had passed all the exams that would certify them as "the best." It took me several years to realize that professors could let students address them by their first name, still give them an extremely hard time, and eventually fail them.

These assumptions of mine, and the actual performances that accompanied them, could be interpreted as symptoms of something real that I could not name but that professionals might have helped me through. My friends had seen me, they had talked, and they had made a diagnosis: I was in "culture shock." Like depression or dyslexia, culture shock was an aspect of the world that human beings had failed to locate properly until science "discovered" the syndrome on its way to finding a cure for it.

There is also another possibility that an anthropologist must consider, and that is the possibility that culture shock is something that is "made in America" with miscellaneous pieces of human behavior that would be ignored anywhere else. Certainly I experienced something driving down Dan Ryan expressway that was not fully comfortable, and an empathetic therapist might have made me talk about it. Certainly, it appeared to my friends that I was puzzled, lost, silenced. America offers a pattern to bring all these things together, and they can be made into something that looks like culture shock. But this practical act of my friends when they used this pattern cannot be taken as evidence of a state of *my* mind. At most it is an indicator of what my friends could do—whether they were indeed aware of the logic of their act, whether they in fact believed

in culture shocks. Other people in other parts of the world have institutionalized other ways of dealing with the odd behavior of the strangers they receive, and there is little evidence that the American organization of these manifestations more closely approximates "reality" than theirs do.

As far as I was concerned, I did not organize my various experiences in such a way as to recognize "culture shock" as something I was suffering from. I had other problems, and they centered on academic and economic issues. The more I sat in classes and the more I was certain I wanted to continue, the clearer it became that I indeed had a problem here. It was a familiar problem. I had sweated through five sets of major exams in France, and the part of my world in the United States that had to do with academic stuff was not so different. I recognized the fear, and I identified where it came from and what might resolve the problem: persistence. Four years later, I received a Ph.D., I was offered a position as an assistant professor at Teachers College, I married a woman who had been raised fifty miles from the town where I had conducted my fieldwork, and I moved to New York City. I was twenty-four years old then, something I sometimes have to downplay when people around me talk about the great advantage of taking breaks in one's education, experiencing the world, growing, and so on. I had graduated to a new set of problems as I worked toward tenure and at becoming an acceptable husband and father.

Would this four-year journey through the University of Chicago have been easier if I had been born in the middle-class areas of the United States whence came most of my friends? Many anthropologists would initially have to answer "yes" to this question. Individuals have cultures. They feel more comfortable in their own culture. They thrive best there, and they will experience great difficulty when they move to a "new" culture. Such statements have now become common sense, not simply among some anthropologists but also among the people of the United States at large. The anthropologist Michael Moffat once wrote that it may indeed be more enlightened to deal with foreigners through the constructs of culture difference ("After all, he has a different culture, so he can't understand what we are talking about") than through the constructs of intelligence ("He is really dumb").

Still, I believe I had a much easier time at the University of Chicago than many of my friends. Many of them now appear to me much more confused than I was about the fundamental condition of our life there. Then, of course, I thought they were the best and the brightest. After two or three years of studying America, I began to suspect that they could not see through the logic of liberal democracy, or perhaps that they could not organize their own behavior in terms of the vague understanding they must have had that things were not quite working the way they were dramatized to be. When our professors told us that they were treating us "like junior colleagues," they failed to specify that the basic condition of life for a junior assistant professor is (not) getting

tenure. Democracy is about races on level fields and about fair competition among formal equals—it is not about universal success. Although every person may become president of the United States, most people will fail. For the vast majority of people in democracies, the fear of failure at the hands of personal interlocutors is the basic condition of everyday life. From the earliest, the persons that may be the closest and most familiar—parents, kindergarten teachers, Little League coaches, peers, and so on—are also the persons who can decide that we are not quite making it, that we need "help," "therapy," a "special" program, an environment "better suited to our needs." At school, on the job, and in most other endeavors, a middle-class person will continually be evaluated and, after a while, evaluating. Democracy is about the daily experience of inequality. In the long run, to mistake an attempt to make the competition fair (by evaluators making themselves "open," "friendly," "personable," and so on) for a sign that one has won is to leave oneself open to major difficulties when the race is actually run and announcements of the prizes are made.

THANKSGIVINGS

I am not so sure that I was in culture shock. From my point of view (and by comparison to my experiences in France), the faculty at Chicago were particularly nice in performing their appointed tasks, and I felt privileged when, in one instance, I could establish another kind of familiarity: the hierarchical familiarity of the adopted son who must continue to demonstrate the confidence his father has placed in him.

In any event, I had a few good friends. I could have extended conversations about structuralism, functionalism, models in the muddles, and other esoterica. I could ask what became and remains the fundamental question of my academic work: How can it make sense for someone to say, or do, this or that? What are the conditions that make this statement or sequence of behavior a reasonable response? What are the costs of other possible responses? How could someone perform something unexpected and not have it noticed as unexpected? In other words, how can one lie? How can one make something that had not been there before? How, perhaps, can one who is not American make it through the University of Chicago?

There happens to be another American myth about the fate of foreigners when they cross the boundaries of the United States. This is the myth of the immigrant who comes with nothing—not even the language—and "makes good" through hard work, self-reliance, and, perhaps, intelligence. This myth is now enshrined in the sacred space of Ellis Island. This is the myth now told about immigrants from the Far East or certain Caribbean islands. This is the myth that explains what is taken to be the success of Asian students in American universities,

and it is tempting for me to couch my experience in these terms. I, too, did not speak English well when I came (through the corridors of Kennedy Airport rather than the halls of Ellis Island); I, too, worked hard. And I too made it into the upper ranks of my chosen profession. And so I could celebrate (as in fact I do) the institutions (enlightened admission procedures, generous scholarship funds, understanding professors, and so on) that made it possible for what I must be too modest to call my "talents" to flourish. For this and for many other gifts, I must give thanks every next to last Thursday of November.

There is enough verisimilitude in the Pilgrims' myth to couch my history in the United States in its terms. Still, like all myths, this particular origin myth tells us more about America and what it highlights and downplays than it tells about the experience of immigrants—except as the contents of this myth slowly become an aspect of their conditions that immigrants cannot ignore. For me, as perhaps for many immigrants, including the original Pilgrims, the United States started as the ideal of what France should be but, for whatever reason, could not achieve: a place where an intellectual interest in how human beings live could be comfortably served, with easily accessible libraries, concerned professors, financial help, and so on.

Only later did I understand that all this came at a price. The United States is not simply a more efficient version of France. It is a different place altogether, a different culture, and one cannot accept its gifts without also becoming a part of it. My first Thanksgivings were wonderful anthropological times when I was confronted with stylized, if not ritualized, dramatic performances that revealed America to me in its glory even when the actual details were altogether gross. There was the slightly ridiculous turkey, the continual tellings of overeating, the football games, the plateful of messy mush, and the interactional and physical struggles around the organization and realization of the event (at whose house? on what plane? with whose money?). Thanksgiving is not an easy time for most people in the United States, but it is also a moment of great social unison, a moment reimprovised in individual families, a ritual of beginnings and temporary endings, and a moment when the American spirit is celebrated and reconstituted, even as resources are redistributed.

Thanksgiving is a more encompassing product of America than the other sacred celebration of origins myth, the Fourth of July. I continue to delight in analyzing it, but I also know that it is now "my" myth too—that is, a myth that is being used all around me, for me, and possible against me. For my first two Thanksgivings at the University of Chicago, I was invited by a wonderful association with its headquarters in, of all places for a French man, Paris, Illinois, to come and spend the four days in a home there. Hundreds of certified "foreign students" in Chicago were picked up in buses and driven to various small towns of "downstate Illinois." The families, we were told, would "share their gifts" with us on Thanksgiving day. Only much later did I understand how this event itself recapitulated American culture in a manner that traditional social structural anthropologists would have loved. We stopped at all the sacred spots—including the "Second" Baptist Church, which happened to be our one contact with blacks in Paris. We attended a basketball game at the high school, we visited farms and a small factory, and we were formally asked where we wanted to go to church on Sunday and were taken there. Everything was perfect. There was an inside and there was an outside. My hosts and I safely constructed me as being "outside"—or so I thought.

I am not a certifiable foreigner anymore, and some look at me in a funny way when I tell them that I am not a citizen. After all, I have resided in the United States for more than 20 years; I married an American citizen and have three children who are all citizens; and I am a full professor at a major university. Even if I wished to place myself "out" when the time to give thanks for America comes, I would not get much cooperation. If I ever feel that I have "become" American, I will make the declaration of faith, the pledge of allegiance, the final statement of willingness to be born again civically in a process aptly named "naturalization."

There are many reasons why I will not take this step, why I cannot recite the immigrant myth any more than I can recite the "culture shock" myth. I cannot deny, however, the reality of the myth as something that concerns me. For a long time, I may have deceived myself into thinking that, because I was placed in the position of "foreigner to America," I was free of it. I know better now. From the day when I first entered an American consulate in Marseille and began to respond to the practical requests of the culture, I have been "caught" in America. I yielded, and I continue to yield. I filled out the form and submitted to the medical exams. Later, I became fluent in English to the point that I cannot quite talk anthropology in French. Professionally, I have tried to be an "accessible" faculty member who addresses his students by their first names and lets them address him by his first name. I laugh understandingly when people talk about the state of culture shock I was in or about the way I still have a French accent, a French writing style, and a French way of arguing. I was never coerced. Indeed, I can say that I have chosen to remain caught by America. To tell the truth, when I was finally fully surrounded by America during my fieldwork in Appleton, I discovered that I fundamentally liked this culture and that I enjoyed the cultural manifestations that many of my student friends, at the end of the 1960s, were struggling so hard to escape.

AMERICA AS FACT

Enjoying America does not make an American. It does not make me one, and it does not make anyone else one either. This is the anthropologist, the professional outsider, speaking. Neither I nor anybody

else in the United States can be explained by culture shock and its attendant psychointeractional traumas. I cannot be explained through the myth of the immigrant.

Still, both myths are real conditions of my life here. "American culture" is as present to me, and to everyone else in the United States, as the Atlantic Ocean, and I know by experience that landing at Kennedy airport is not much different from plunging into water: Certain specific things had better be done fast if one does not want to drown (or be shipped back to the old country). It is not the case that America is real because all of us in the United States "believe" it is real. America and its myths, rituals, customs, and institutions are real because people persist in placing us in conditions where we have to respond practically to the conditions according to their own logic.

Take a question like "Why are you not getting naturalized?" or a statement like "I guess you do not understand what we are trying to say because you are not from this country." The people who tell me such things are themselves caught in a cultural web that makes these statements commonsensical to the people who utter them. These questions and statements then become an aspect of the cultural web in which I now have to perform. I can make many different responses; I can even ignore the question. But other people will respond to me in the terms set by the question, and it will indeed make more sense to try and construct an answer—particularly if I expect to stay in the good graces of the people who asked the question. To the question about naturalization, I usually answer that I will not change citizenship because I believe that nationalism is one of the most dangerous ideas evolved by the human species (more dangerous than the atomic bomb). I believe that the process of changing citizenship puts a focus on nationalism and thus reinforces the institutions of nationalism that I wish to undermine. I cannot help being a French citizen because the current international order is based on every human being on the globe "having" a nationality. But I can choose not to carry an American passport.

This is a plausible answer even though many in the United States who have given a different answer, or who are the descendants of people who gave a different answer, do not like it. After all, the most powerful political statement of the 1960s was not "Make love, not war." It was "America, love it or leave it." Note, that to be meaningful, both statements depend on joining the concept of love with a proper social unit—couple, family, state, and country—for which one must eventually give thanks. This is the frame within which questions about one's relationship to America are placed, and to the extent that one cannot prevent the questions from being asked, this is the frame within which one's own answers, behaviors, and life history are placed; cross-referenced with other answers, behaviors, and life histories; and then evaluated.

I have been writing that I was "placed in the position of an outsider" rather than "I was an outsider," for precisely the reason that the framing

of my actions, during my first years in the United States as well as now, has never been under my control. I was free not to apply for a visa to come to the country, but once I decided to apply, I placed myself within one of the categories defined by Congress and the State Department. So I got a "student visa," which gave me special rights, privileges, duties, and limitations. When I went to Paris, Illinois, on my Thanksgiving trips, the fact that I had such a category was used, by both myself and my hosts, as the essential aspect of my history that justified my trip. Once in Paris, the formal differences between my hosts and myself were further expanded: In their speech, their behavior, and their actions, they and I improvised a particular version of "the foreign student." That this was a special time tightly controlled by American patterns is perhaps best revealed by the experience of students from sub-Saharan Africa. In the practices of the town, they were, precisely, *not* black, and they were given access to parts of homes that other people of African descent never touched—except perhaps as domestics.

Later, when I finally received my doctorate, I could have left the United States. To stay, I had to redefine myself, administratively at first. And so I was a "resident alien." With this status, I was moved out of the position of outsider. My story was recast as it could now be said that I was "one of those foreign students who say they want to return home at the end of their studies but always find a way of staying here." There are flattering versions of this story and not so flattering ones. I never can quite control which version is going to be told when, and I may try desperately to argue—as I am doing here—that there is more to me than such stories. But I cannot prevent such stories from being told in the particular ways that make America unique and altogether beautiful.

FUTURES: PATHS NOT YET TAKEN

Cultural anthropology, uncomfortably, has a place within the behavioral *sciences*. What it writes about the fate of human beings when they get together is eventually judged by its power to enlighten us about the universal processes that are involved in the production of uniquely particular moments. What I write about America, to the extent that I consider myself a scientist of sorts, I could write about France. France, too, is a historically developed frame, a set of patterns used in France to handle the social world the French—and all others who cross the boundaries of the country—get to inhabit. The history of France has been different from the history of the United States, and the cultural worlds that have evolved in each geographical and institutional space are different. Not only are they different, but they are also at work maintaining a difference, since—as time has passed—each has become part of the historical reality of the other. America, for a long time, was a reproach

to France ("Why can't we be like them?"). France, or at least the vague vision of Europe that may cross the Atlantic, can be, for America, either a cautionary tale about what people escaped, a reference point to measure "how far we have gone," or—more recently—an occasion to worry about competitors.

What one says, writes, and does is always framed by a cultural pattern that offers the phonology, vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, style, and genre in which the statement could be expressed. As the Russian philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, wrote, we always speak in borrowed words on a marketplace crowded with others also struggling to make themselves heard over our own voices. I take this to be a major finding of scientific research in anthropology and sociology. No statement, however framed, is ever ***determined*** by its frame. Indeed, all statements are, wittingly or not, challenges to the frame, attempts to say more than is allowed by a stereotypical application of the pattern.

Certainly, here, I am writing in English, in the style of a quasi-scholarly paper, within the framework of anthropology, and so on. It would, however, be more accurate to my condition to say that I am struggling with all that has been given me to say something that will move us along. Whether it does is not really in my hands. As such a paper is read, it becomes a more or less temporary or powerful moment in the history of the reader. It may be disregarded or may cause one to stumble as one moves along one's path. It may also move someone to notice another path or to open another one. This response itself may then become a possibility for me. It may be ignored, or it may lead to a further reframing of my own life.

Nothing is standing still in human life. Neither America nor I, each as historical facts—albeit of an incommensurably different scale—can control each other or even our own future. We can answer questions about what was done, about the process through which things get done, but not about what is going to get done. There is no definite answer to that question except the one found in a famous phrase that summarizes best my first experiences of America, a phrase that nicely ties liberal democratic strivings with their biblical roots in their many manifestations: The answer is blowing in the wind.