The perils of designer tribalism

by Roger Kimball

On the bane of “Third Worldism” and Roger Sandall’s book The Culture Cult.

A generalized tolerance will be best achieved if we leave undisturbed whatever it is which constitutes the special character of particular individuals and peoples, whilst at the same time we retain the conviction that the distinctive worth of anything with true merit lies in its belonging to all humanity.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

[A] life without piety, including piety to the past, courts grief and does damage to the life of the living individual.

—Edward Shils

They are very gentle, and know nothing of evil.

—Christopher Columbus

In 1983, the French writer Pascal Bruckner published Le sanglot de l’homme blanc, an astringent, intelligently disabused attack on recent European efforts to sentimentalize the Third World. Duly translated into English a few years later as The Tears of the White Man: Compassion as Contempt (Free Press, 1986), the book excited a brief spark of interest among conservatives and then sank without trace into the tenebrous limbo of the out-of-print.

It was an unfortunate, and undeserved, fate. Bruckner’s book is a vigorous indictment of “Third Worldism”—the odious species of romance that glorifies everything foreign, exotic, and primitive while simultaneously railing against civilization, science, and modernity. (That other social philosopher, W. S. Gilbert, was right to save a place on his famous list for “the idiot who praises with enthusiastic tone/ All centuries but this and every country but his own.”)

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The very power of Bruckner’s indictment helps to explain its neglect. The message he brought was distinctly unwelcome music to the ears of politically correct intellectuals, whose smugness and sense of moral superiority, then as now, was inextricably bound up with the mendacities of Third Worldism and kindred specimens of emotional blackmail. (Just listen to Susan Sontag on Kosovo or Michael Ignatieff on Rwanda.) “Solidarity with oppressed peoples,” Bruckner wrote, is above all a gigantic weapon aimed at the West. The logic of aggression is at work in Third World solidarity, and this has made it a continuation of the Cold War by other means. Being non-European is enough to put one on the side of right. Being European or being supported by a European power is enough to make one suspect. The bloody messes in banana republics, and butchery of political opposition and the dictatorial lunacy by their petty chieftains are all brushed aside. Such trifles will not restrain the progress of these peoples toward socialism. What seems criminal in Cuba, Angola, and Guinea has the real purpose of washing away the far greater crime of colonialism.

Clearly, Bruckner’s message is as pertinent today as it was in the 1980s—more so, perhaps, since the attitudes it chronicles, if often less histrionic, are today more thoroughly institutionalized, more thoroughly absorbed into established opinion.

It is worth pointing out that, unlike many Third Worldists, Bruckner had firsthand knowledge of the problems about which he wrote. Having worked as a member of the International Action Against Hunger, he animated compassion with deeds. If this tempered his romanticism, it also sharpened his vision. Bruckner did not march arm-in-arm with Jean-Paul Sartre. He was not a beneficiary of UNESCO’s extortionist escapades. He did not rail against Western oppression. He did not curse the evils of colonialism. On the contrary, he understood that the West’s real crime was not pursuing but rather abandoning its responsibilities as a colonial power.

Part of what makes *The Tears of the White Man* such an important book is Bruckner’s sensitivity to the aerodynamics of liberal guilt. He understands what launches it, what keeps it aloft, and how we might lure it safely back to earth. He understands that the entire phenomenon of Third Worldism is fueled by the moral ecstasy of overbred guilt. Bruckner is an articulate anatomist of such guilt and its attendant deceptions and mystifications. “An overblown conscience,” he points out, “is an empty conscience.”

Compassion ceases if there is nothing but compassion, and revulsion turns to insensitivity. Our “soft pity,” as Stefan Zweig calls it, is stimulated, because guilt is a convenient substitute for action where action is impossible. Without the power to do anything, sensitivity becomes our main aim, the aim is not so much to do anything, as to be judged. Salvation lies in the verdict that declares us to be wrong.

The universalization—which is to say the utter trivialization—of compassion is one side of Third Worldism. Another side is the inversion of traditional moral and intellectual values. Europe once sought to bring enlightenment—literacy, civil society, modern technology—to benighted parts of
the world. It did so in the name of progress and civilization. The ethic of Third Worldism dictates that yesterday’s enlightenment be rebaptized as today’s imperialistic oppression. For the committed Third Worldist, Bruckner points out,

 salvation consists not only in a futile exchange of influences, but in the recognition of the superiority of foreign thought, in the study of their doctrines, and in conversion to their dogma. We must take on our former slaves as our models. . . . It is the duty and in the interest of the West to be made prisoner by its own barbarians.

Whatever the current object of adulation— the wisdom of the East, tribal Africa, Aboriginal Australia, pre-Columbian America —the message is the same: the absolute superiority of Otherness. The Third Worldist looks to the orient, to the tribal, to the primitive not for what they really are but for their evocative distance from the reality of modern European society and values.

It is all part of what Bruckner calls “the enchanting music of departure.” Its siren call is seductive but also supremely mendacious. Indeed, the messy reality of the primitive world—its squalor and poverty, its penchant for cannibalism, slavery, gratuitous cruelty, and superstition—are carefully edited out of the picture. In their place we find a species of Rousseauvian sentimentality. Rousseau is the patron saint of Third Worldism. “Ignoring the real human race entirely,” Rousseau wrote in a passage Bruckner quotes from the *Confessions*, “I imagined perfect beings, with heavenly virtue and beauty, so sure in their friendship, so tender and faithful, that I could never find anyone like them in the real world.” The beings with whom Rousseau populated his fantasy life are exported to exotic lands by the Third Worldist. As Rousseau discovered, the unreality of the scenario, far from being an impediment to moral smugness, was an invaluable asset. Reality, after all, has a way of impinging upon fantasy, clipping its wings, limiting its exuberance. So much the worse, then, for reality. As Bruckner notes, in this romance adepts “were not looking for a real world but the negation of their own. . . . An eternal vision is projected on these nations that has nothing to do with their real history.”

The Australian anthropologist Roger Sandall does not mention *The Tears of the White Man* in *The Culture Cult*, his new collection of essays. But his discussion is everywhere informed by the same spirit of salutary impatience. What Bruckner criticizes as Third Worldism, Sandall castigates as “romantic primitivism” and (marvelous phrase) “designer tribalism.” What is romantic primitivism? In the words of Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, it is “the unending revolt of the civilized against civilization.” Sandall begins with a small but telling contemporary example. In 1996, the actress Lauren Hutton took her two young boys to Africa to witness a bunch of Masai warriors and their witch doctor perform a tribal dance, slaughter a cow, and drink some warm blood straight from the carcass. The whole spectacle was captured for the television audience by Ted Turner’s minions. Miss Hutton loved it: according to Sandall, “Wow!” was her frequent refrain. But her young children, one of whom burst into tears, were terrified. Quite right, too. The purpose of the television show was to show that “Masai culture is just as good as Western civilization, if not better.” Miss Hutton’s enthusiasm was sparked by the display of “authentic” tribal passion. But her children saw the episode for what it was: a glimpse into the heart of
What Sandall describes as “the culture cult” dreams of a new simplicity: a mode of existence that is somehow less encumbered, less rent by conflicting obligations than life in a modern industrialized democracy. It is a vain endeavor. The romanticization of the primitive only emphasizes one’s distance from its simplicities. Romanticism in all its forms is an autumnal, retrospective phenomenon: the more fervent it is, the more it underscores the loss it laments. “It is time,” Sandall writes, “to stop dreaming about going back to the land or revisiting the social arrangements of the past.” Miss Hutton’s happy ejaculations were prompted by such dreams. What she heard among those Masai savages as they danced about and drank blood was Pascual Bruckner’s “enchanting music of departure.” But it is, alas, a departure to nowhere. As Sandall observes, life is about “ever-extending complexity.” To deny that is to neglect the “Big Ditch” (Ernest Gellner’s term) that separates the modern world from its primitive sources. On one side of the ditch is the rule of law, near universal literacy, modern technology, and the whole panoply of liberal democratic largess. On the other side is— what? “Most traditional cultures,” Sandall writes, “feature domestic repression, economic backwardness, endemic disease, religious fanaticism, and severe artistic constraints. If you want to live a full life and die in your bed, then civilization—not romantic ethnicity—deserves your thoughtful vote.”

_The Culture Cult_ is partly a brief for the Enlightenment values of universal culture and scientific rationality, partly an attack of the various atavisms that Sandall sees impeding the growth of those values. Its method is not systematic but exemplary. Sandall proceeds through a number of illustrative case studies. There are not many heroes in this book. One finds kind words for Ernest Gellner and for Karl Popper’s book _The Open Society and Its Enemies_, written in the 1940s when Popper was in New Zealand. For the most part, however, _The Culture Cult_ is a tour through an intellectual and moral rogues’ gallery. There are suitably wry bits about anthropological fantasists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, anti-industrialist utopians like Robert Owen (founder of the New Harmony commune), and randy utopians like John Humphrey Noyes (founder of the Oneida Community). Sandall also devotes whole chapters to Isaiah Berlin and to the bizarre anti-free-market rantings of Karl Polanyi. It is useful to be reminded that Polanyi, writing in 1960, believed that “West Africa would lead the world” and that record-keeping with pebbles and rafia bags in eighteenth-century Dahomey rivaled the achievements of IBM.
Most of the figures Sandall deals with are familiar. Like Bruckner and many others before him, he singles out Rousseau and the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder as the spiritual grandparents of romantic primitivism. Rousseau contributed the hothouse emotional sentimentality, Herder the völkisch celebration of cultural identity at the expense of assimilation and a recognition of universal humanity. (As the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut observed, “from the time of Plato until that of Voltaire, human diversity had come before the tribunal of universal values; with Herder the eternal values were condemned by the court of diversity.”)

Sandall’s real target is the assumption—common coin among anthropologists—that “culture” is a value-neutral term and that, as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it in 1951, one had to “fight against ranking cultural differences hierarchically.” In his book The Savage Mind—which argues that there is no such thing as the savage, as distinct from the civilized, mind—Lévi-Strauss spoke blithely of the “so-called primitive.” (It is significant that Lévi-Strauss should have idolized Rousseau: “our master and our brother,” “of all the philosophes, [the one who] came nearest to being an anthropologist.”) One of Sandall’s main tasks in The Culture Cult is to convince us that what Lévi-Strauss dismissed as “so-called” is really “well-called.” Sandall does not mention William Henry’s In Defense of Elitism (1994)—another unfairly neglected book—but his argument in The Culture Cult reinforces Henry’s accurate, if politically incorrect, observation that the simple fact [is] that some people are better than others—smarter, harder working, more learned, more productive, harder to replace. Some ideas are better than others, some values more enduring, some works of art more universal. Some cultures, though we dare not say it, are more accomplished than others and therefore more worthy of study. Every corner of the human race may have something to contribute. That does not mean that all contributions are equal. . . . It is scarcely the same thing to put a man on the moon as to put a bone in your nose.

Henry’s quip about the bone in the nose elicited the expected quota of outrage from culture-cultists. But the outrage missed the serious and, ultimately, the deeply humane point of the observation. What Sandall calls romantic primitivism puts a premium on quaintness, which it then embroiders with the rhetoric of authenticity. There are two casualties of this process. One is an intellectual casualty: it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the truth about the achievements and liabilities of other cultures. The other casualty is a moral, social, and political one. Who suffers from the expression of romantic primitivism? Not the Lauren Huttons and Claude Lévi-Strausses of the world. On the contrary, the people who suffer are the objects of the romantic primitive’s compassion, “respect,” and pretended emulation. Sandall asks:

Should American Indians and New Zealand Maoris and Australian Aborigines be urged to preserve their traditional cultures at all costs? Should they be told that assimilation is wrong? And is it wise to leave them entirely to their own devices?

Sandall is right that the answers, respectively, are No, No, and No: “The best chance of a good life for indigenes is the same as for you and me: full fluency and literacy in English, as much math as
we can handle, and a job.”

This is a truth that was broadly recognized at least through the 1950s. With the failure of colonialism, however, came a gigantic failure of nerve. (It might be said, in fact, that the failure of colonialism was a gigantic failure of nerve.) More and more, confusion replaced confidence, and with confusion came the pathologies of guilt.

Since the folly of locking up native peoples in their old-time cultures is obvious, but it is tactless to say so, governments have everywhere resorted to the rhetoric of “reconciliation.” This pretends that the problem is psychological and moral: rejig the public mind, ask leading political figures to adopt a contrite demeanor and apologize for the sins of history, and all will be well. Underlying this is the assumption that we are all on the same plain of social development, divided only by misunderstanding.

But this assumption, Sandall emphasizes, “is false.” And it was recognized as false by governments everywhere until quite recently. Around 1970, the big change set in. Then, instead of attempting to help primitives enter the modern world, we were enjoined to admire them and their (suitably idealized) way of life. As Sandall observes, “the effect on indigenes of romanticizing their past has been devastating.”

If your traditonal way of life has no alphabet, no writing, no books, and no libraries, and yet you are continually told that you have a culture which is “rich,” “complex,” and “sophisticated,” how can you realistically see your place in the scheme of things? If all such hyperbole were true, who would need books or writing? Why not hang up a “Gone Fishing” sign and head for the beach? I might do that myself. In Australia, policies inspired by the Culture Cult have brought the illiterization of thousands of Aborigines whose grandparents could read and write.

The statistics are grim. Between 1965 and 1975, Sandall reports, Aborigines arrived at one college with sixth-grade reading levels; in 1990, after primary education had been handed over to local Aboriginal communities, that had fallen to third grade. Today most Aborigines arrive at the college in question almost completely illiterate.

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This social disaster was the result of specific political policies. But the policies themselves were the result of a moral attitude, one that many anthropologists have actively nurtured. In part, the attitude is a reflection of the Lévi-Straussian “non-hierarchical” view of culture: the view which denies that there are important distinctions to be made between la pensée sauvage and the mind, for example, of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In part, what we might call the “anthropological attitude” is a
coefficient of the idea—also fostered by Lévi-Strauss, among many others—that culture is at bottom a “narrative,” a product of “social construction.” And the results of that development—corrosive skepticism, blasé nihilism, irresponsible relativism—have helped to place anthropology in the intellectual slum wherein it now molders. “For more than twenty years,” Sandall writes, “anthropologists have written about constructing reality as if the world and everything in it were mere artifact, about building identity as if any old self-glamourizing fiction will do, about creating the past as an enterprise more exciting than history, about inventing tradition as if traditions were as changeable as store windows.” “As if,” indeed. Sandall is very good on all this, and I only wish that he had devoted more space to discussing the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who is mentioned only in passing. He is one of the most influential and oleaginous proponents of the all-is-narrative, all-cultures-are-equal position now writing. He is a real postmodern culture-cultist who would have benefited—well, we would have benefited—from a closer look.

It is part of the ethos of designer tribalism to foist all of one’s own attitudes and longings onto the apparently blank canvas of whatever primitive populace happens to be in vogue at the moment. To some extent, this is simply a matter of ignorance, as illustrated, for example, by Christopher Columbus’s report that the people he discovered “are very gentle, and know nothing of evil.” But the culture cultist supplements ignorance with heavy helpings of ideology and idealization. He looks at an exotic culture and, lo and behold, he finds himself looking into a flattering mirror. This is one reason that natives always seem to be non-smoking, vegetarian, sex-worshipping, drug-taking, eco-conscious, progressive-thinking pacifists—according, anyway, to the press releases distributed by the culture cultists.

Sandall speaks in this context of anthropology’s tendency to “normalize the primitive while treating civilization as aberrant.” Consider the Maoris. In contemporary New Zealand, Sandall notes, one finds “a miscellaneous army of teachers, academics, government servants, clergy, radical lawyers, progressive judges, journalists, and numerous other bien pensants promot[ing] the revival of traditional Maori culture even more fanatically than the Maori do themselves.” He cites an Anglican priest who rails against the “monocultural grip on all our institutions” that British colonialism supposedly still exerts (if only!), and cites various teachers who wish to return the education of Maori children to the tribes. In the background is a rose-tinted view of the Maoris as a peace-loving, ecologically conscious, spiritually delicate people who have been abused for two centuries by hard-bitten, materialistic Europeans.

In fact, the ecological record of the Maoris would not win any plaudits from the Sierra Club. Shortly after paddling up to New Zealand in their canoes eight-hundred years ago, the Maori indiscriminately burned huge swathes of forest. They also decimated the wildlife. Actually, “decimate” is far too weak a word. Within a short time, Sandall notes, some 30 percent of the bird life on New Zealand had become extinct thanks to the depredations of the Maoris. All twelve species of moa, for example, a large, flightless bird without natural predators before the Maori arrived, became extinct some six-hundred years ago. According to Sandall, it was perhaps the
fastest megafaunal extinction ever recorded. Not that the Maori were particular about where they got their protein. Divided into numerous tribes, they were incessantly at war. Prisoners were routinely baked and eaten. But all of this is papered over. And even as the Maori past is systematically distorted and rewritten, so their future is jeopardized by government policies that, in the name of “bi-culturalism” and preserving tribal customs, dooms its beneficiaries to a life of second-class citizenship.

Sandall is at his best when puncturing over-inflated reputations. Many of his subjects, it is true, have been repeatedly punctured before. Somehow, though, the gas keeps seeping back in, so new puncturings are always in order. For example, it is pretty well known today that Margaret Mead’s book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) should be filed under fiction, not anthropology. Mead herself acknowledged that in populating the South Seas with sexual libertines she was pushing speculation “to the limit of acceptability.” But Mead’s book, along with Ruth Benedict’s investigation of the pueblo life of the Zuni in *Patterns of Culture* (1934, another work of what Sandall calls “didactic semifiction”), was immensely influential. Both were part of the tsunami that legitimized “the bohemian counterculture of Greenwich Village,” first in the universities and then in the 1960s in the culture at large. We cannot be too frequently reminded that what was presented as anthropology is really a species of fantasy.

*The Culture Cult* is a valuable addition to the literature of common sense. It goes some distance in doing for the discipline of anthropology what Keith Windschuttle’s book *The Killing of History* did for the discipline of history. That is to say, it exposes the reign of ideology and mystification—in an academic pursuit, first of all, but also as it has spilled over into the culture at large. If Sandall’s book is finally less effective than *The Killing of History*, that is largely for two reasons. In the first place, it is more miscellaneous. The chapter on Isaiah Berlin, for example, contains some valuable observations—anything that lets a bit of air out of that inflated reputation is welcome—but it offers a discussion that is a tangent to Sandall’s discussion of the culture cult.

It must also be said that *The Culture Cult* does not operate at the same intellectual level as *The Killing of History*. One of the things that distinguishes Windschuttle’s book is its patient trek through the historical record. If Michel Foucault said something silly about asylums in the Middle Ages, Windschuttle went to the trouble of reading through Foucault and then through a number of independent sources in order to establish what actually happened. Sandall’s discussion tends to be much more second-hand. His treatment of Rousseau, which relies heavily on Paul Johnson’s discussion in *Intellectuals*, is a case in point. I have an appropriately low opinion of Rousseau’s character and believe there can be no doubt that his influence on politics and education has been almost wholly malign. But Rousseau was more than the sum of his failings, more than an “interesting madman” (as one of his mistresses described him), and his writings about the state of nature, however preposterous, were more than an expression of his paranoia and resentment against Paris.

I agree wholeheartedly with Sandall that “cultures differ profoundly, and these differences have
profound effects.” I also share his judgment that the future, if we are lucky, belongs to the values that made Europe the economic, political, scientific leader of the world. Sandall is right also to contrast “the wealth-producing cultures of Western Europe and the poverty-producing traditional cultures admired by romantic primitivism.” Nevertheless, his simple opposition of “culture versus civilization” needs to be taken with a grain of salt. For one thing, his hunt for romantic primitives turns up some distinctly unlikely candidates. For example, in “Civilization and Its Malcontents,” Sandall tells us that T. S. Eliot and Ludwig Wittgenstein “were drawn to the all-inclusive anthropological concept of culture, something which is the antithesis of High Culture, and which would undermine its status and fatally weaken its defense.” I’ll leave Wittgenstein to one side, except to say that anyone who can dismiss the author of *Philosophical Investigations* as endorsing a world of “groupthink, grouptalk, group action, all cozily packaged in a *Gemeinschaft* world” is not a reliable guide to the philosopher’s work.

And Eliot? Sandall quotes (but cites the wrong page) Eliot’s statement, from the appendix of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, that by “culture” he means “first of all what the anthropologists mean.” But to think on that account that Eliot endorses the non-hierarchical, all-cultures-are-equal view that Sandall attacks is to completely mistake Eliot’s purpose. On the very same page as the passage Sandall quotes, Eliot observed that “there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and the higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function.” Reflecting on his work at *The Criterion*, Eliot spoke of his colleagues’ “common concern for the highest standards of both thought and expression, . . . a common curiosity and openness of mind to new ideas” and “our common responsibility . . . to preserve our common culture uncontaminated by political influences.” Sandall’s description of Eliot’s “somnambulistic ruminations” is itself a piece of somnambulism, coaxed into action, perhaps, by too rigid and superficial a distinction between culture and civilization. The sociologist Edward Shils was certainly no enemy of what Sandall champions as “civilization.” But in his book *Tradition* (dedicated, incidentally, to the spirits of Max Weber and Eliot), Shils observed that “a mistake of great historical significance has been made in modern times in the construction of a doctrine which treated traditions as the detritus of the forward movement of society.” If romantic primitivism is an enemy of civilization, so too is the view that piety toward the past is always an impediment to progress.
