A brand new book titled THE CULTURAL CREATIVES offers important insights into U.S. culture and how we might organize to change our future.[1] It offers entirely original, new perspectives that could help the environmental and social justice movements find new paths, sidestepping the troubles that have stymied them in recent years. Listen up.

THE CULTURAL CREATIVES was written by Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson who have spent more than a decade doing survey research to discover the values that we in the U.S. hold dear. ("Values are the best single predictor of real behavior," they say.) They find that, based on fundamental values, U.S. citizens can now be classified into three major groups: Moderns, Traditionals, and Cultural Creatives. We all recognize Moderns and Traditionals, but most people don't know that the Cultural Creatives exist. Even the Cultural Creatives themselves are not aware of their huge numbers -- 50 million strong, according to Ray and Anderson. Here lie the seeds of a cultural revolution -- one that is already well along.

The Moderns: The Moderns are the dominant subculture of our time. They make the rules we all live by -- they control the civil service, the military, the courts, and the media. Some of them operate the multinational corporations. Their ideology is laid out for us every day, in detail, in the NEW YORK TIMES and the WALL STREET JOURNAL, in the other major papers, and on TV. The Moderns' belief in a technological economy is reshaping the face of the globe. The Moderns tend to dismiss other cultures and other ways of life as somehow inferior. In sum, "The simplest way to understand today's Moderns is to see that they are the people who accept the commercialized urban-industrial world as the obvious right way to live. They're not looking for alternatives," say Ray and Anderson. To Moderns, growth is not only good, it is essential. What's most important to moderns is:

(a) making lots of money;
(b) climbing the ladder of success with measurable steps toward one's goal;
(c) having lots of choices (as a consumer, or voter or on the job);
(d) being on top of the latest trends, styles and innovations;
(e) supporting economic and technological progress at the national level;
(f) rejecting the values and concerns of native people, rural people, Traditionals, New Agers, and religious mystics.

Moderns represent 48% of the U.S. citizenry (93 million adults) and, in 1995, they had a median family income of $42,500.

The Traditionals: Traditionals represent 24.5% of U.S. citizens (48 million adults). "Many Traditionals are not white bread Republicans but elderly New Deal Democrats, Reagan Democrats, and old-time union people as well as social conservatives in politics...." Traditionals tend to believe (among other things) that:

(a) patriarchs should again dominate family life;
(b) FEMINISM is a swearword;
(c) men need to keep their traditional roles and women need to keep theirs;
(d) family, church, and community are where you belong;
(e) customary and familiar ways of life should be maintained;
(f) it's important to regulate sex -- pornography, teen sex, extramarital sex-- and abortion;

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Cultural Creatives are not defined by particular demographic characteristics -- they are accountants and social workers, waitresses and computer programmers, hair stylists and lawyers and chiropractors and truck drivers, photographers and gardeners. The large majority of them are very mainstream in their religious beliefs. They are no more liberal or conservative than the U.S. mainstream, though they tend to reject "left-right" labels. Really, their one distinguishing demographic characteristic is that 60% of them are women, and most Cultural Creatives tend to hold values and beliefs that women have traditionally held about issues of caring, family life, children, education, relationships, and responsibility. In their personal lives, they seek authenticity -- meaning they want their actions to be consistent with what they believe and say. They are also intent on finding wholeness, integration, and community. Cultural Creatives are quite clear that they do not want to live in an alienated, disconnected world. Their approach to health is preventive and holistic, though they do not reject modern medicine. In their work, they may try to go beyond earning a living to having "right livelihood" or a vocation.

Ray and Anderson summarize the forces that have given rise to Cultural Creatives: "In the twenty-first century, a new era is taking hold. The biggest challenges are to preserve and sustain life on the planet and find a new way past the overwhelming spiritual and psychological emptiness of modern life. Though these issues have been building for a century, only now can the Western world bring itself to publicly consider them. The Cultural Creatives are responding to these overwhelming challenges by creating a new culture." New businesses, new management styles, new technologies, new forms of social organization (for example, leasing products, such as carpets and refrigerators, to consumers instead of selling them, to make sure they are recycled), and new decision-making techniques (the precautionary principle, for example) -- the Cultural Creatives are constructing a new world in our midst, largely ignored by the media.

By different paths, fifty million Cultural Creatives emerged from (or were influenced by) social movements of the '60s and '70s. Ray and Anderson describe 20 such movements that have spawned Cultural Creatives who, in turn, have begun to put a positive spin on movements that have been mainly oppositional. "Slowly a lesson has been drifting in on one movement organization after another. At some point, opposing something bad ceases to be enough, and they must stand for positive values, or produce a service that is important to their constituency," Ray and Anderson note.

Ray and Anderson see this shift occurring in the environmental movement, and we see it too. "Cultural Creatives are urging the environmental movement into a new phase. Having educated us through protests and information, some are moving beyond that now, to develop new kinds of businesses, technologies, and cooperative ventures." To put labels on these innovations, they are the Natural Step,[2] clean production,[3] and zero waste.[4] Together, they are beginning to rebuild the industrial infrastructure of the Western world. There's a long way to go, but it's a start.

A major impediment to further innovation is the fact that Cultural Creatives all think there are very few of them when in fact there are very many of them. Therefore, "They do not know that they have the potential to shape the life of twenty-first century America," say Ray and Anderson. "Like an audience in a theater, Cultural Creatives all look in the same direction. They read the same books and share the same values and come to similar conclusions--but rarely do they turn toward one another. They have not yet formed a sense of 'us' as a collective identity; nor do they have a collective image of themselves."

Again and again, Ray and Anderson stress that the Cultural Creatives are hampered by their own lack of self-awareness. They don't yet see themselves in their diverse totality, and so they fail to recognize their own potential for creating a new world. "Since they are part of a subculture that cannot yet see itself, these millions of Cultural Creatives do not know what a potential they carry for our common future." Until we recognize each other's existence, we cannot work together.

This is a rich, thought-provoking book. If you are interested in influencing our future, you will definitely benefit from reading it.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


[3] On clean production, see REHW #650, #651, #704.


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