



**Culture of Intolerance: Chauvinism, Class, and Racism in the United States.** Mark Nathan Cohen. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998. 325 pp.

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In a public bathroom at the University of Michigan at Dearborn the other day, I noticed on one wall the words "All Arabs smell like pigs" written very neatly in black ink. I wish I could say those words were scrawled or contained an error of spelling or grammar—anything to explain such a statement, which, to an anthropologist, is anathema. In a way, it is for the author of those words that Mark Nathan Cohen has written his fine book, *Culture of Intolerance: Chauvinism, Class, and Racism in the United States*. And after reading it I can only say how very much I wish that anonymous graffiti author would read this book.

Written for a general audience, Cohen's style manages to be both utilitarian and artistic. Tracing notions of "race" through both science (chapter 2) and culture (chapter 3), Cohen manages to get at some of the underlining ideas about human variation found in the West generally and the United States specifically. His close reading of scientific research on "racial" difference (chapter 6) stands as one of the best-written refutations of such ideologies in both technical, "scientific" circles and the popular realm. In his call for change throughout the book Cohen is every bit the idealist, and he cannot be attacked for it, really. The book ends with a specific call for "transforming the [c]ulture of intolerance" (chapter 8), and there Cohen brings all the weight of his arguments about culture and relativism to the front and uses each idea with great effectiveness. Professional anthropologists are, of course, familiar with much if not most of what Cohen writes, and yet I still found this an enjoyable read.

Yet it is his very idealism that becomes most troubling. Certainly his call (plea, actually) is a worthy one. Indeed, few anthropologists would regard it as anything other than common sense. And *Culture of Intolerance* is very much about anthropological common sense. Part of the genre of books on "race" in science and society beginning for many with Stephen Jay Gould's *Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), Cohen's book is indeed a welcome addition. Often written with poise and grace (which by itself is amazing for an anthropologist!), it is both well argued and balanced. Of particular value is Cohen's insightful chapter on cultural relativism that, alone, would be a useful reading for most introduction to anthropology students. When Cohen writes, "ultimately, cultural relativism is about freedom of thought" (p. 133), I am reminded of why, all those years ago, I changed my major. However, it remains troubling: troubling not in that I cannot agree with it, troubling not in that I do not think it worthy of the time of most readers. In fact, this so very



good a book remains troubling for no inherent reason other than the fact that it seems to be preaching to the choir. In other words, I cannot picture the writer of that racist graffiti in my university bathroom ever picking it up and thumbing through a few pages.

This may be my own failure, my own lack of belief in humanity. It certainly is not that of the book.

It is possible to step back from this position on the book, though. Indeed, although few racists take the time to read Gould, and fewer still will read this fine book, it does add to the general discourse on "race" and "race" issues in (post)modern American society. And, as the book adds to that general discourse in this fashion, helping to direct the zeitgeist, if you will, a reader must ask, Is this not a good thing?

Well, again, this question raises some troubling notions. It is possible to argue that if the intent of a book such as this is to "direct the zeitgeist," then Cohen should work harder to do just that. However, while I wholly agree with the vast majority of his ideas, as well as his many cultural illustrations behind them, it is important to note that the vast majority of his possible readers will find those very ideas I admire to be somewhat ephemeral and certainly too relativistic. When, for example, Cohen expresses the perfectly acceptable idea (in anthropology) about all cultures that "every culture has built-in mechanisms for explaining its failures . . . and . . . is largely impervious to [outside] challenge" (p. 95), most Americans (his potential audience) would disagree. I suspect most would argue that this is true of "other" cultures but not their own. Again, this may be my own failure of faith in humanity.

Thus, in my view, ethnocentric liberal anthropologist that I am, Cohen's *Culture of Intolerance* ranks among the finest in its genre. I am not sure, however, that the genre in question could not be titled "self-help for doubting cultural relativists." While I am sure that all of us so labeled will find this a wise and insightful book, I am equally sure that out there, not reading, another young person is writing on another bathroom wall something about each and every one of us.

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