

Cannibal Culture

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The national deficit is now nearly \$8.5 trillion and growing by more than \$1.6 billion a day. More than 25 million people have died of AIDS since 1981, and 40 million more worldwide are infected. More than 2,500 American young men and women have died in combat in Iraq, along with more than 40,000 Iraqi civilians. America has the largest prison population in the world and one of the worst educational systems among the industrialized nations of the world (ranked 18 out of

24). Scientists alarmed over greenhouse gas emissions warn that we may be fewer than 25 years away from the irreversible tipping point that will upend our global climate, permanently inundating coastal regions around the world and ultimately plunging us into a millennium-long ice age. Our current government is in total denial, and it appears as though the response of a great many Americans has been to go shopping. For them, as for the nation, *I consume, therefore I am* has become the dominant ethos and fundamental proof of existence. It's what it means to be American.

Am what? is the question. If we are what we eat, as the axiom holds with a slightly different emphasis, then the evidence argues persuasively that we are a nation of cannibals and, as such, physically and spiritually sick. Perhaps it's time to call in the forensic vomitologists to analyze the content of our diet and diagnose what's killing us (and everyone else because of us).

The short answer is greed, but that's not nearly as filling – or nauseating – as the food for thought offered by John Perkins, a former operative of the National Security Agency, in his book *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. In it he details how developing countries are invited to the banquet of economic progress only to end up au jus as the entree. Enticed or cajoled by U.S. intelligence agencies and multinational corpora-

tions into accepting huge loans to develop their infrastructure, they inevitably default on the payments, and the U.S. demands its pound of flesh, which typically includes control over United Nations votes, installation of military bases and access to natural resources such as oil. The recipient countries never even see the money; it's transferred from banks in Washington to the U.S. engineering and construction companies like Halliburton that are contracted for the project as a condition of the loan.

A case in point is Ecuador, a country Perkins was instrumental in ensnaring. For every \$100 of crude taken from the rain forests, \$75 go to U.S. oil companies, \$18 to pay off the loan, \$4 to cover government expenses and less than \$3 to the health, education and welfare of the country's poor. To meet its foreign debt, the country has been forced to sell off more of its rain forests to the oil companies, whose trans-Andean pipeline has already leaked half a million barrels of oil into the fragile forests, and who, for more than twenty years, dumped four million gallons of toxic wastewater per day into the once pristine rivers. Entire species have vanished, and three indigenous cultures have been driven to the verge of collapse.

Ecuador is not unique, but typical of cultures we cannibalize and whose artifacts we then appropriate as elements of interior decoration. Ultrasophisticated, we dine at ethnic restaurants while our government gorges on the real cultures of Ethiopia, India and Mexico, belching up cheap imitations of mainstream capitalism in their place.

The Caribs (from whence we get the word “cannibal”) were completely wiped out – consumed – as were the Arawaks and the Aztecs, not by their own alleged cannibalism, but by European imperial powers that project their own metaphorical cannibalism on others. The remnants of a few tribes on scattered reservations are all that is left of many Native American peoples devoured en route to our Manifest Destiny. African American men continue to be eaten alive by a for-profit prison system now slated to become the new peculiar institution of unlimited free labor. And just as women were often the victims in literal cannibalistic societies, so too have they become the eye candy, butter, breasts and thighs of public consumption in the meat markets of our own.

As of this writing, the United States has spent more than \$296 billion on a war of aggression in Iraq, while the United Nations estimates that for less than \$43 billion we could have provided clean water, adequate diets, sanitation and basic education to every person on the planet. Meanwhile, 24,000 people starve to death every day. Compared with these banquets of death, the occasional cannibal stew of so-called savages seems thin gruel indeed for the devil's gluttony.

Unlimited growth – the cannibal's faith and glutton's grail of endlessly increasing profits – is a false god, a phantasm, a pyramid scheme. There are limits to which nature itself will be taxed. We currently have a 1.5 footprint – that is, we consume one and a half times what the earth can produce. Soon it will be three times what we produce. Ultimately, our unbounded orgiastic consumption can only lead to self-cannibalization – a culture reduced to little more than an appetite, a mouth, ravenous for the very hands that feed it. Ω