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**Lance Armstrong:
The Reality Show (A Cultural Analysis)**

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BIO SKETCH

My quixotic career as a cultural anthropologist (anthropological semiotician) was launched when I was seven years old. Until that time I had lived with my mother and grandmother in the countryside of northern Georgia. My mother then married a Montana rancher and we moved to his ranch in a valley on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. My transformation from cracker to cowboy was accomplished in a few short, rather traumatic months (I learned to drop my r's with a vengeance). The experience gave me a deep and lasting appreciation for the contingency of every social arrangement and, I think, predisposed me to a career in anthropology. I sometimes wonder if my experience may be applied in a general way to others who wind up in cultural anthropology: Have they, too, undergone wrenching changes, disruptions, rejections at an early age which set them to reflecting, not on the naturalness of things, but on how unlikely is any particular form of human existence? We find ourselves belonging to a wildly paradoxical group: a "community" of outsiders (I develop this thought in a brief essay, "Who Wants To Be An Anthropologist?").

As an undergraduate at a small liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon, I cobbled together a rather improbable "interdivisional major" in anthropology and philosophy. At the University of Chicago I conducted fairly traditional fieldwork in Arawak and Carib villages of Guyana, where I found people who lived with their own agonizing version of the cracker / cowboy identity crisis, only for them it consisted in an ever-shifting social and cultural process of fashioning a tribal or ethnic identity in a new, rapidly changing nation.

I was later to do somewhat less traditional fieldwork in various islands of the Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Martinique, Barbados) and what many would consider downright wacky fieldwork at the San Diego Zoo and Sea World.

After more than a decade at McGill University, I resigned my tenured post and eventually wound up as a sub-tropical man in the American sub-tropics (well, actually, barren desert wasteland) of Palm Springs, California. There I launched the Center for Peripheral Studies, still stalking the tortuous contours of that borderland separating cracker and cowboy. The Center's mission statement and a number of essay and books may be found at www.peripheralstudies.org.

ABSTRACT

Victor Turner and others (including Arnold Van Gennep, Mary Douglas, Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel) have suggested that the analyst can best get to know a particular society / culture by focusing his attention on events that challenge or disrupt the normal arrangement and flow of social life. Rather than describe in meticulous detail the intricate way in which social things fit together (in tidy four-ply Parsonian boxes), one takes a close,

dispassionate look at how things fall apart, at how, sometimes just for a moment, sometimes for an extended period, sometimes, in the case of revolution, forever, the fabric of society is torn and thereby reveals the separate threads of its composition. I think this approach is particularly well-suited to the cultural analysis of contemporary American society, for its 24/7 cable news networks have the nearly magical power to single out an isolated event and magnify it instantly to national or even global proportions.

It is this orientation, a predisposition to attend to the *edges* or boundaries of social phenomena, that fired my interest in the spectacular event of Lance Armstrong's confession on a January 2012 airing of The Oprah Winfrey Show. Armstrong admitted the truth of long-standing allegations that he had used "performance enhancing drugs" during multiple Tour de France races. That confession, made before the millions who watch Oprah, triggered an avalanche of commentary, almost all of which was in the vein of hand-wringing, soul-searching despair and outrage: We, the great American public, had been lied to, deceived by a son of the soil whom we had elevated to the status of hero. A small army of lawyers and government agents rushed in to redress the grievous wrong with lawsuits, penalties, revocation of awards. *Surveiller et punir*; monitor and punish.

My essay argues that the public outcry should be regarded as a *lens* through which the dispassionate observer may identify and explore the basic values of American society that underlie the outpouring of righteous indignation. In the course of that cultural analysis, those values are found to be shot full of contradiction and ambivalence. Seen in this light the Lance Armstrong affair exposes deep, and largely irreparable fault lines in American society. Particular loci of those fault lines are spectator sports and the recent phenomenon of reality television.

SEVEN successive Tour de France victories, anointed four times as Sportsman of the Year by the United States Olympic Committee, countless other awards, a mound of books, magazine exposés, and newspaper articles accusing and defending Lance Armstrong of wrongdoing, a small army of lawyers launching suits and counter-suits, multimillion-dollar endorsement deals, and it all came crashing down around him that fateful day in January 2013 when he walked out and took his seat on the set of the most sacred shrine of the American conscience: The Oprah Winfrey Show.

The show is America's Confessional, and Oprah the Grand Inquisitor. In front of millions, under the blazing studio lights, she can extract confessions of sins concealed for years by the most distinguished among us. From best-selling authors of bogus books to repentant celebrities, Oprah has them in tears, telling all between car-giveaways and painkiller commercials. The CIA could have saved all the expense and bad press over its secret prisons and waterboarding – just trundle Khalid Sheikh Mohammed out on stage and Oprah would have had him singing like a canary in time for top-of-the-hour cable news.

And what about the audience for Lance's confession, those couch potato voyeurs who experience life as a bizarre combination of talk shows, reality TV, cable news breaking stories, sitcoms, and HBO/Showtime movies, that is to say, what about *us* – the great American public?

With her dramatic unveiling of Lance's charade, Oprah bestowed the ultimate gift on that audience, better even than those fabled car-giveaways. For a few brief moments, before we had to return to our troubled, occluded lives, she allowed us to experience a true, pure feeling, hot as a poker, bright as a laser: the *righteous indignation* that wells up inside the American breast when we encounter a fundamental betrayal of trust, a scam far worse than Bernie Madoff's (who merely stole from the rich), a con that subverts the balance of the way things are and are supposed to be. Lance was our ultimate athlete-hero, and in many ways our ultimate American Hero of recent times, far more impressive and sponge-worthy than a Super Bowl quarterback (for all the weeks of hype, really just a flash-in-the-pan, forgotten until next season), a muscle-bound home-run slugger, or an unlikely sort-of-black president with a lawyer's golden tongue. Day after day, year after year, mile after torturous mile, Lance wore that yellow jersey, the leader's emblem of the Tour de France. And – the sweetest treat of all – this gaunt, determined young Texan from the outskirts of Dallas wore it proudly through throngs of spectators right there in that citadel of anti-American snobbishness: France.

Lance's betrayal of the public trust was especially painful because he was the ultimate underdog, the hero-image we Americans somehow manage to embrace while riding roughshod over the rest of the world. It was a modern miracle that he should have been on that bicycle seat at all, that he should even have been alive. At twenty-five, with his reputation as a top cycling competitor already established, he was diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer, a cancer that had already spread to his brain and lungs. Following surgery

and chemotherapy he was given less than a 50-50 chance to live. Survival, let alone a return to sports, seemed a remote possibility. Yet with excellent physicians and an innovative regimen of chemotherapy, he not only survived but three years after his surgeries won the first of his Tour de France victories. His is a remarkable story, perhaps the most impressive come-from-behind living legend of American history. And, cruelest of ironies, all made possible by that fount of life-giving, life-extending wonders, the pharmaceutical industry, which was later to strike him down.

Lance Armstrong was an athletic prodigy, endowed with remarkable stamina from childhood and, quite probably, from birth. While still in junior high school he became attracted to endurance sports – swimming, running, bicycling – and, seeing a poster for an “Iron Kids Triathlon,” entered the competition. He won. He was thirteen years old. Two years later he was ranked first in the under-19 category of the U. S. Triathlon. At sixteen, he became a professional triathlete. In 1988 and 1989, aged 18 and 19, he held the title of national sprint-course triathlon champion. Two years later he became a professional in the world of international cycling competition, and put together an impressive series of victories which culminated in his first Tour de France win in 1999. The scandal that erupted around him in later years should not detract from the remarkable gifts of a truly exceptional human being. Rather, it adds to the tragedy: that one so gifted should feel he needed an edge to remain on top.

But . . . It is precisely at this point, when our moral compass seems fixed on a steady bearing, that it is necessary to question the basis of our certitude, to question whether we inhabit a neatly partitioned social world in which some deeds and people are good, some evil, and in which we know for a certain fact when someone – Lance Armstrong in this case – crosses the line, goes over to the Dark Side. Oprah, with her enormous audience of other right-thinking Americans, does not question the premise that good and evil are clear to all, necessary anchors to secure us in a rapidly changing, often bewildering world. Nor does anyone in her parade of penitents appear to question that premise; they know the secret wrongs they have done and, under the blazing studio lights and Oprah's doe-eyed gaze, confess all to the Grand Inquisitor. It is necessary to ask, in short, whether Lance Armstrong's deeds violated all that is good and decent in human life or whether, just possibly, those deeds actually cast their own inquisitorial light on our basic values. In the very midst of the public firestorm of outrage, it is necessary to ask whether Lance is so awfully bad. [Do you perhaps recall the old joke circulating during the trial of Lyle and Erik Menendez, two enterprising teenagers who took a drastic shortcut to their inheritance by doing away with their parents in their Beverly Hills mansion: “So we shot-gunned Mom and Dad – was that so awfully bad?”]

When one begins to turn the Inquisition back on itself, to consider what the Lance Armstrong affair reveals about our basic values, it is at once apparent that Americans have quite specific expectations of their athletes. By far the most important, and general, of these is

that the star athlete displays his God-given *physical* talent: he performs feats of *natural* prowess before the stadium throngs, the crowds lining the race course, the multitudes of those couch potatoes slumped in front of their giant flat screen HD sets. Not to get too Lévi-strauss on a readership that has mostly turned its back on the master, Americans believe in a fundamental division between Nature and Culture. And the star athlete is the embodiment of The Natural (as played by Robert Redford). His body is his temple, and anything he does to defile that temple is dealt with harshly by bureaucratic agencies established to identify any violation of that ideal. [And by high school football coaches who forbid beer – and even sex – for their Friday-night wonders] Drug tests have become the norm in professional sports: the football or basketball player who tests positive for cocaine or other mind-altering drugs faces suspension. Gone are the days when Mickey Mantle could walk up to the plate drunk as a skunk and swing for the bleachers. But far worse than these debilitating drugs is the use of drugs intended to improve performance: steroids and blood-doping chemicals of all sorts are part of a growing pharmacopeia of the Great Satan of professional athletics, the dreaded and despised *performance-enhancing pharmaceuticals*. These evils subvert the Natural Order of things.

The Lance Armstrong affair has put one little bureaucracy in particular in the spotlight: the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. Created in 2000 to enforce strictures on drug use by Olympic athletes, its lab-coated inquisitors conduct their studies under the Agency's slogan, "Inspiring True Sport." Examining their goals in some detail is at least as revealing of American values as reading those fanciful documents, *The Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*, drafted by a small group of wealthy white slave-owners in the late-eighteenth century:

To be the guardian of the values and life lessons learned through true sport. We hold the public trust to:

Preserve the Integrity of Competition — we preserve the value and integrity of athletic competition through just initiatives that prevent, deter and detect violations of true sport.

Inspire True Sport — we inspire present and future generations of U.S. athletes through initiatives that impart the core principles of true sport — fair play, respect for one's competitor and respect for the fundamental fairness of competition.

Protect the Rights of U.S. Athletes — we protect the right of U.S. Olympic and Paralympic athletes to compete healthy and clean — to achieve their own personal victories as a result of unwavering commitment and hard work — to be celebrated as true heroes.

(www.usada.org)

“ . . . to compete healthy and clean . . . ” The self-righteous obtuseness of the mediocrities who formulated these goals does justice to Ward Cleaver, that all-knowing disciplinarian who dispensed his sage advice every week to keep The Beaver in line.

What is wrong, misled, or, frankly, stupid about the pretentious goals of the U. S. Anti-Doping Agency? Why should we not look to them as an admirable statement of a fundamental morality that all the world, particularly the world of professional athletics, should embrace?

The principal problem with those goals is that they fail to recognize that the dichotomy Nature / Culture embraced by Americans is in fact an elaborate cultural construct, a contrivance which owes little to the joint physical and social endowments of a human being. The crucial fact the lab coats ignore is that there has never been a “natural” man or woman “to compete healthy and clean” in anything. Our bodies are the product of some three million years of an evolutionary process which mixed – and often mangled – discrete physical abilities, technical expertise, and social skills. If it possesses any distinguishing feature at all – and that is quite debatable – what we choose to call “humanity” is a loose and ever-shifting assemblage of biology and culture. For a few technocrats to stroll into this rats nest and begin to dispense ill-formed opinions in the guise of scientific findings is laughable, and terribly sad.

But even if we set aside these big-picture considerations drawn from paleoanthropology and cultural anthropology, the antics over at the U. S. Anti-Doping Agency appear quite limited in scope. Let us begin by granting their premise that professional athletes should be required, under penalty of exclusion from their sport, to refrain from tampering with their “natural” abilities through “unnatural” performance-enhancing measures. This proves to be a slippery slope.

For starters, how do the lab coats identify precisely which chemicals are to be placed on their Index of forbidden drugs? The American pharmaceutical industry is a multibillion-dollar enterprise devoted to creating more and more new drugs (which they tout as being far more effective than their earlier products, whose patents soon expire and fall prey to cheap generic replacements). In tandem with America’s official “war on drugs” (and we all know how well that’s going), the FDA and other bureaucracies like the Anti-Doping Agency face the impossible task of keeping up with, let alone regulating the flood of new drugs hitting the market every year. Where the general public is concerned (the trodden masses without its own army of lobbyists in the Gucci Gulch corridors of Congressional office buildings), the best these agencies can do is require the giant pharmaceutical corporations to issue disclaimers and warnings when they showcase their products in commercial spots on Oprah and the evening news: “Feeling depressed? Take our new anti-depression pill! It’ll make you feel great! . . . Well, actually, it may make you want to kill yourself. But, hey, your doctor will prescribe it!”

Closely related to the challenge posed by new pharmaceutical drugs is the burgeoning group of vitamins, minerals, and other “nutritional supplements” which, because they are deemed “natural,” fall outside the purview of the FDA and similar agencies. When Mother June sent The Beaver down to the corner grocery store to pick up a few things for supper, her shopping list didn’t include items such as acai, ginkgo, kava, bilberry, satvia, or senna. There are thousands of these substances, whose effects on the human body are known only vaguely. And when used in their purified or processed form and in an enormous variety of combinations, it is anyone’s guess what their short or long-term effects may be. Suppose that Lance and other professional athletes, rather than raiding the medicine chest, paid a visit to the local herbalist, who gave them a god-awful tasting brew compounded of berries from the New Guinea highlands, roots from the Amazonian forest, leaves from the Manchurian steppe. After a few weeks of hooking down this stuff, they went out and did amazing things on the race course or playing field. Would our little band of inquisitors at the USADA hastily revise their regulations and go forth to strip medals, return prize money, and generally insure that athletes “compete healthy and clean”? We are a little further down that slippery slope, and picking up speed (but hopefully without any “unnatural” lubricants!).

And here’s another curve ball – no ~~shit~~ spit: Suppose Lance *et al* decide to frustrate the lab coats who routinely sample their urine and blood for tell-tale traces of proscribed substances. Instead, they find a few medical technicians of their own, physicians and therapists at the vanguard of an established and expanding field: ultrasound treatment. Long used to reduce inflammation, relieve osteoarthritis, and promote post-surgery healing, innovative ultrasound treatment is found by these pioneers to strengthen muscle growth and significantly improve stamina. A few weeks of regular treatment have all the *performance-enhancing* effects of steroidal and blood-doping chemicals, but without the unpleasant side effects (you can still get it up!). Natural? Unnatural? Permissible? Proscribed? If the officials decide such treatments confer an unfair advantage, what will they say about deep-tissue massage? Whirlpool baths? The slope grows steeper.

On a not altogether whimsical note, we may extend this inquiry to a quite different scenario. Rather than take a risk with any physical means of improving their games, suppose that “Slammin” Sammy Sosa, Mark McGwire, and Barry Bonds discovered a remarkable sports hypnotist. Under deep hypnosis, they were told over and over, “You are a very good long-ball hitter. You will hit many home runs. You may now wake up and head for the ball park. But first, that will be five hundred dollars.” They then proceeded to hit record numbers of home runs and garner an impressive list of rewards until the whiskey-bloated lawyers in Congress, finding it unfashionable to hunt Communists, hauled them in for forced testimony that forever tarnished their outstanding careers.

Taken together these examples seriously undermine the moral certitude exuded by USADA bureaucrats, Oprah, her vast audience, and the “wrongdoers” themselves. Still, we

are just coming to what is by far the slipperiest part of our downward rush, as represented by the *equipment* and *facilities* which are integral to athletic competition. Virtually every athletic event (perhaps excepting only nekked female mud-wrassling, which has not yet been designated an Olympic event, *tant pis*) involves the use of complex, manufactured artifacts in a specialized, often fantastically expensive setting such as the ball park or Olympic stadium. Kevin Costner's *Field of Dreams* is built on a tract of bulldozed urban blight rather than an Iowa cornfield, and only after the city fat cats have stuffed a whopping bond issue down the throats of the rube citizens.

Even a seemingly simple *mano-a-máquina* arrangement like a man on a bicycle is hedged around by a host of technical and financial matters. The bicycle itself is not two centuries old; before that the particular combination of physical ability and mental toughness required to win a Tour de France was likely expended harvesting crops in a seigniorial manor. Today's racing bicycle is a piece of cutting-edge technology, the product of advanced metallurgy, engineering, and aerodynamic tests conducted in a wind tunnel. Lance Armstrong's bicycle (rather, bicycles since he required a stable of them for a single Tour de France) was a \$10,000 machine with incredible lightness and tensile strength. That *machine* was essential to his victories. Its importance cannot be overstated. Suppose that somewhere in Bulgaria, Romania, or Something-or-other-istan there lives a strapping farm lad with the metabolism of a Galapagos turtle and a dream of himself in the yellow jersey leading the pack through the tortuous course of the Tour. The only bicycles available to him, however, weigh twenty-five pounds and have tires that would fit a light truck. Unless some wheeler-dealer promoter spots the lad and plucks him out of his rural oblivion, he will grow old picking beets and riding his two-wheeled clunker around the town square.

Even when an athlete's equipment is minimal, as, say, with a Speedo suit worn by an Olympic diver or swimmer (but not *too* minimal – none of those scandalous Riviera codpieces for our Natural Man), the *facilities* required for the sport are monumental. Greg Louganis, the Olympic diving sensation of the 1980s, grew up in southern California around swimming pools, trampolines, and diving coaches (he was later to become yet another star penitent on The Oprah Winfrey Show). The Olympic diving pool for the ten-meter platform and three-meter springboard where Louganis launched his remarkable aerial displays is at least sixteen feet deep, not exactly Mom and Dad's backyard above-ground Target special. Had Greg grown up in Bayou country as one of the *Swamp People*, learning how to dive off the dock of granddaddy's crawfish hole, he is unlikely to have perfected his signature reverse 2½ pike.

These examples could be compounded endlessly, and all underscore the crucial fact ignored by the narrow-minded lab coats of the USADA that their so-called "true sport" involves the seamless meshing of physical ability *and* technical expertise. It is almost certainly true that these technocrats are kept too busy compiling lab reports and giving legal

testimony to keep up with the vastly more interesting scientific discoveries in the field of paleoanthropology. Tool use has long been thought to be a distinctive feature of the human species: long before language evolved to anything like its present state early hominids were feeding and protecting themselves with the help of stone tools. The human body and nervous system (including the brain) evolved to promote tool use; such is our Natural Man. Moreover, it now appears that, contrary to previous anthropology textbook wisdom, stone tool use actually *preceded* the appearance of the entire *Homo* genus. The earliest stone tool users (and possibly makers) were not humans at all, but an australopithecine lineage that flourished over three million years ago. The most famous member of that lineage (whose claim to naturalness might now be challenged by the USADA!) is Lucy (in the sky with diamonds). Her conspecifics, *Australopithecus afarensis*, were using stone tools to butcher carcasses some half-million years before the appearance of the *Homo* line (URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/12/science/12tools.html?pagewanted=all& r=0>). Human evolution was in large part a consequence of tool use, not the reverse.

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Hurling down this slippery slope, we at last plunge over the edge of a vast precipice (like James Bond in the adrenaline-pumping opener of *The Spy Who Loved Me*) into a dark and bottomless sea. We have encountered and must now face (sink or swim!) a stunning paradox: An athlete's physical body is in fact *less* natural than the implements / tools / machines he employs to display his skill. For the ancestors of those artifacts *created* his body millions of years before all the recent hype about biotechnology engineering a race of cyborgs. The human body is basically a particular sort of artifact, which we happen to find very special (since we inhabit one).

How might this revelation affect our deeply rooted belief that Nature and Culture are fundamentally separate? If that dichotomy now appears far too nuanced and convoluted for bureaucratic dullards to comprehend, let alone regulate, what are we to make of our strong feelings, our love, of the athlete? If not a display of unblemished physical perfection, what is it about "true sport" that we celebrate, even worship?

Ironically a clue to the answer to these questions is to be found in the very language of those who regulate athletics: their goal is to detect and banish the use of "performance-enhancing drugs" because they seek to insure the *integrity of performance*. Anyone can ride a bicycle, but only a very few can ride at speed over the two thousand miles of jumbled terrain of the Tour de France. We like to see people who can do things very well.

But only certain things. Warren Buffet is an exceptional performer when it comes to making money, but we don't throng the streets of Omaha to catch a glimpse of its Oracle. And we don't award him any gold medals (since he already has most of the gold). Nor do we

celebrate the people skills and networking abilities of those we send to Congress; in fact, we'd much rather tar and feather that lawyerly vermin.

What we value about *performance* is intrinsic to the meaning of the word: it is an activity involving display and focused attention. The performer, as an individual or member of a small group or team, behaves before an audience in a way that engages, excites and rivets the attention of that audience. He is the catalyst essential to transforming the humdrum doings of daily life into an *event*.

We have been hurled over the edge of a slippery slope into the sea below, but we now find ourselves in troubled waters. If we as right-thinking, fair-minded Americans insist or acquiesce in our government and its lackeys regulating the performers among us, what are we to think about the highly discrepant treatment we apply to those individuals? Performers come in all stripes. We bestow attention, even adulation, and riches on them based on their ability to engage and excite us. Some accomplish this on the playing field, some on the race course, some on the three-meter board and still others on stage, film, CD, or even, to invoke a rapidly disappearing world, through the written word. Yet if it is superb performance we value, why should we apply different standards to the outstanding performers among us? Particularly now that we have seen how intractable the Nature / Culture opposition is, and in deference to the cherished American value of fair play, should we not demand that all our performers adhere to the same standards of conduct?

Perhaps, to the delight of the bureaucrats in the USADA, we should greatly extend their mandate, tasking them with the responsibility of insuring that all our performers are "healthy and clean" exemplars to the general public and, especially, to our young people who emulate them.

Yet as the inquisitors begin their new assignment, they immediately encounter some deeply disturbing material. Having decided to begin their new studies with the performance-arts equivalent of Olympic gold medalists and, their arch villain, Lance Armstrong, they compile CDs, DVDs, and journalistic accounts of a musical group which over the decades has provided the most successful spectacles of any type of performance, including sporting events such as the Super Bowl. That group goes by a whimsical name: The Rolling Stones. The lab coats confirm persistent and shocking rumors that a prominent member of that group, one Keith Richard, is often under the influence of a variety of controlled substances and, horror of horrors, sometimes performs on stage while in that condition. Moreover, they learn that the leader of the group, a Mick Jagger, is said on occasion to do the same, prancing around the stage like the drug-crazed maniac he apparently is. Considering the blatant disregard these performers show for their bodies and, far worse, for the multitudes that idolize them, the USADA must act swiftly. Using their expanded authority, they act to strip The Rolling Stones of every musical award the group has received over the past half-century. And the bureaucrats, supported by a phalanx of lawyers, take steps to impound and seize the

fortune the group has amassed through its illegal activities. They embark on the daunting task of removing the group's songs from YouTube and other social media while confiscating any CDs and DVDs it locates in stores and online.

Having sniffed out this flagrant violation of our basic values, the lab coats are distressed to find that the stench goes far deeper than contemporary musicians caught up in the narcissistic drug culture. Additional research documents that major figures in literature were anything but "healthy and clean," and, even more alarming, that their work is tainted by unmistakable signs of their substance abuse. On reviewing the novels and short stories of Ernest Hemingway the investigators find that all exude the strong bouquet of liquor, and that the blood-alcohol content of his later work in particular should be incorporated in its titles: *Islands in the Stream (of Rum)* for example. Fearful of the harmful effect Hemingway's conduct may have on the millions of Americans required to read his poisonous books in school, the authorities make every effort to eradicate that influence by seizing copies of his books and expunging references to him in textbooks. And just as they did with Lance Armstrong and his trophies, they strip Hemingway of his Nobel Prize.

As the expanded USADA digs deeper into the field of literature, they find other cases that require their inquisitorial attention. They discover that the nation's youth, already the victims in a raging war on drugs, are subjected throughout middle school and high school to the poetry of an especially pernicious figure: the notorious opium addict, Samuel Coleridge. Like Hemingway, Coleridge not only made no secret of his drug abuse but wove it into the body of his work with dark, disturbing images. In the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which millions of our children are required to read at a young and impressionable age, we find deeply troubling passages:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie;
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,
And drew my eyes away;
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came and made
My heart as dry as dust.

.....

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the moon.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue, and white.

Coleridge's final outrage, which prompts the lab coats to drastic action in removing his name from the record of world literature, is that he actually composed a large part of one of his most famous poems, *Kubla Khan* while in an opium stupor. Even Coleridge's decadent English contemporaries were scandalized by his audacity in publishing his hallucinations as poetry. Clearly, such behavior is unacceptable to anyone who values the integrity of performance.

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The integrity of performance. At this point in our inquiry it is difficult to know just what that phrase might mean. Readers will appreciate that the previous pages have been an exercise in *reductio ad absurdum* (although an occasional reader with ties to the Moral Majority might endorse these arguments to the letter!), a fixture of philosophical and mathematical thought since the pre-Socratics. If we approve the punishments meted out to Lance Armstrong for his use of performance-enhancing drugs, then we must condone punishment for other exceptional performers who have done the same. If that course of action is untenable, then our treatment of Lance Armstrong is seriously in error. Something is deeply amiss in the American socio-logic.

To begin to understand what that might be, it is necessary to employ the classical *reductio* argument in a way that departs from the formal proofs of Russell and Quine. In the matter before us there is no unambiguous truth-value: **[It is not the case that A implies B and A implies not-B]** does not apply. The law of contradiction, a bulwark of traditional philosophy, is of no help here. Why? It is because the Lance Armstrong affair, like every cultural phenomenon, obeys a “logic” that owes far more to Camus than to Russell. What most Americans accept as unquestionably true – the need to assure that athletic performers be “healthy and clean” – is shot through with ambiguity and irresolvable conflict. Our moral compass is not fixed on a true course because there is no true course; an unflinching examination reveals that compass to be spinning haphazardly from one point to another. Any certain truth one proposes is therefore incomplete and mistaken, and to insist on it, particularly by legislating it, is an absurd undertaking. It is a page from Camus’ *Rebel*, not Russell’s *Principia*.

It seems the only honest approach for a cultural analysis of the Lance Armstrong affair and, by extension, American society in general, is to identify key *dilemmas* at the heart of our set of basic values. [For a detailed presentation of this proposal, see Chapter 3, “A Theory of Culture as Semiospace” of *American Dreamtime*, available at www.peripheralstudies.org.] Any credo put forward as a guide for behavior, especially the all-too-common odious variety which regulates and punishes, is inevitably skewed, a one-sided distortion of an underlying absurdity.

The key dilemma (or “elemental dilemma,” following James Fernandez) in the Lance Armstrong affair is the irresolvable conflict posed by an extraordinary individual being both an autonomous actor *and* a social being subject to the laws and standards of a group composed of highly diverse but mostly ordinary individuals. We value his exceptional performance yet at the same time insist that he conform to rules set by all-too-unexceptional people who want to live in a mediocre world.

The unhappy marriage between the individual and society is a fundamental feature of human life, but is particularly strained in the United States. Only in Camus’ world would the slave-owner Thomas Jefferson draft what is arguably the best-known sentence in the English

language: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .”
Founded on absurdity, American society over the past two-plus centuries has become a land of irresolvable contradictions (we are the logician’s excluded middle, the “or” symbol in the *Principia* proposition: *2 · 11. $\vdash . p \vee \sim p$).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of *competition*. Created equal, everything in life urges us *to get ahead*. Of course, it is impossible to get ahead without leaving others behind. During the first decade of the 21st century financial inequality in the United States has returned to the extremes reached during the boom-and-bust era of the late 1920s that precipitated the Great Depression:

The Wealth Distribution

In the United States, wealth is highly concentrated in a relatively few hands. As of 2010, the top 1% of households (the upper class) owned 35.4% of all privately held wealth, and the next 19% (the managerial, professional, and small business stratum) had 53.5%, which means that just 20% of the people owned a remarkable 89%, leaving only 11% of the wealth for the bottom 80% (wage and salary workers). In terms of financial wealth (total net worth minus the value of one's home), the top 1% of households had an even greater share: 42.1% (“Wealth, Income, and Power,” G. William Domhoff, URL: <http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>).

If competition for wealth and social status has now largely played out, with one per cent of Americans owning nearly half of the country’s financial resources, we non-one-percenters are left with a burning need that has no real-world economic outlet. How can one hope to get ahead when the odds are so terribly long?

It seems that American culture has generated two complementary responses to the agonizing problem of increasing inequality and wage-servitude in this land of golden opportunity: spectator sports on a massive scale; and television reality shows. While politicians of a declining Roman republic of the 2nd century BC devised the scheme of “bread and circuses” to keep their masses from rising up in protest at their corrupt regimes, the American establishment has hit on a more stringent plan: forget the bread and concentrate on the circuses.

Sporting events have lost most of their former appeal as local affairs in which ordinary people could participate: While kids still play ball in vacant lots on occasion (when they aren’t exercising their thumbs on their iPods) and while a few oldsters still slog around softball diamonds in community parks, much of the participatory nature of sports has lapsed. Instead, enormous Colosseum-like structures have been erected in our cities, and every four

years an entire sports complex – a sprawling athletic village – is built to host the Olympic Games. Those kids still playing Little League baseball are inculcated, sometimes violently by dads frustrated by their own mediocrity, with the hallowed American value of competition. Yet only a tiny fraction of those kids wind up in the big leagues, The Show that mesmerizes the herd made up of their former teammates who did not make the cut. Baseball, our unofficial national pastime, has been transformed almost beyond recognition over the past several decades. Billionaire owners trade millionaire players in a 21st century slave market and send them out to play in immense stadiums erected as municipal shrines at taxpayers' expense, stadiums with roofs, climate control, and AstroTurf for grass. Games played at night under batteries of lights with near-freezing temperatures outside have become the norm for the World Series (the exigencies of cable TV coverage demand it). And the playing season, already long, has been extended to pump up the bottom line. The team itself has become a specialized corporate unit. The boys of summer have become the designated hitters and base runners of November.

Even with their new corporate structure and big-screen HDTV appeal, however, spectator sports have taken a back seat to a phenomenon that has exploded at the heart of American popular culture: reality shows. In a sense, MLB, the NFL, and the NBA serve up sports programming that is itself a genre of reality television, since they are unscripted displays of American competitiveness in action. But the definitive shows that have completely transformed American television are much more recent than corporate-based sports. Productions of the 1970s such as *The Dating Game*, *The Newlywed Game*, and *The Gong Show* prepared the way for shows of the late 1990s and 2000s that took the television industry and the American public by storm. The phenomenal success of the now-iconic shows *Survivor* and *American Idol* have ushered in a new viewing environment with a myriad of shows that feature *competition* as the supreme value in virtually every facet of American life. Participants in these shows do not simply go on vacation to exotic locales (*Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*), enjoy singing and dancing (*American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*), work at advancing in the world of business (*Apprentice*), form romantic attachments (*The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*), or even, in what may well be the most pernicious of these shows, play the little-girl game of dress-up (*Toddlers & Tiaras*). JonBenét's body lies a-mouldering in the grave. Participants do none of these real world things; instead they engage in contrived and cutthroat competition to see who can do reality-show things best, who can be *the winner*.

As traditional religious faith and church attendance wane even in this land of Puritan ancestry, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that reality television has become the new national religion, one that engages and excites tens of millions of viewers and keeps the most popular shows at the top of rating charts. From week to week, we can't wait to see who gets voted off *Survivor* and who the nasty judges of *American Idol* send home in tears. It is a "religion" based, not on Christian love or Islamic orthodoxy, but on raw, unbridled, in-your-face competition. However, the bitter irony of reality television is that the situations and

made-for-television personalities and dramas of the shows are hopelessly artificial, distorted and contrived versions of competitive life in an American society which has already picked the winners – that tiny one per cent who own and control the bulk of the nation’s resources. The reality of American life, its stark inequality, racial hatred, rampant gun violence, perpetual war, untreated medical conditions, prisons (for-profit!) bursting with a population that dwarfs that of Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag – none of this is touched on in the breadless American circuses that enthrall us. For all too many of us, the multitudes that make up the shows’ audiences, actual life is incredibly alienating and painful, and so we eagerly grasp at a fictional reality composed of the basest stereotypes and passed off as genuine.

In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud lays out a formidable and chilling argument in which he describes monotheistic world religions as a collective case of a self-delusion neurosis, a neurosis cultivated by people incapable of facing life’s problems without a cognitive / affective crutch. And in *Civilization and Its Discontents* he extends that argument to civilization as a whole: human society is a fabric of palatable lies, woven over the ages to disguise irresolvable conflicts within each individual psyche. Here is the reality which our new national religion, reality television, does everything to conceal.

In its tentative encounter with its host culture – ourselves – American cultural anthropology has paid insufficient attention to these fundamental arguments which come to us brilliantly presented in the work of Camus and Freud. Instead, that faltering academic discipline has preferred virtually to ignore Camus’ penetrating analysis of modern society and to dismiss Freud and the psychoanalytical approach as inadequate to the task of the description and analysis of social action (and incidentally has tarred Lévi-Strauss’ profound thought with the same brush). Although anthropologists may occasionally speak of cultural analysis as cultural criticism, that discussion is generally confined to economic and political topics. But the problem before us goes deeper; it goes right to the heart of the system of basic values we profess to embrace. As suggested above, a close analysis of those values reveals them to be shot full of contradiction and ambivalence. Rather than pursue that line of thought rigorously, cultural anthropology as it has developed in the United States tends to put a happy face on social life, taking as its program the elucidation in meticulous detail of the symbolic composition of culture – essentially an exercise in hermeneutics which celebrates the intricate structure of its subject, and not the discordant systems of non-meaning integral to the key dilemmas of American and any culture.

It is much nearer the truth to regard culture, not as a treasure trove of a people’s vital essence, but as a disease, a virulent outbreak which infects and poisons its carriers. To approach culture from this perspective requires the anthropologist to examine and dissect it with the cold, analytical precision of the pathologist. It requires Nietzsche’s coldness, which he advocated repeatedly to little avail. [For applications of this idea, see *Culture, Mind, and Physical Reality: An Anthropological Essay*, and *Shit Happens: An Immoralist’s Take on*

9/11 in Terms of Self-Organized Criticality, available at www.peripheralstudies.org] In its advanced pathological state, it is essential that the anthropologist approach his analysis of American society as a pathologist would a diseased organism, seeking out the specific toxins and tumors which are in the process of destroying it.

In that analysis, a particularly malignant tumor attached to vital organs of our society is the body of reality shows; these sap whatever creative energy survives in a sadly diminished America. Those shows are so virulent because they tap directly into the core tissue of American values: to tame the wilderness through individual effort; to make something of oneself starting with the very little available to the immigrant; or again, in a phrase, *to compete and win*. It is often said that American society owes its distinctive character to the experience of pioneers and settlers faced with a vast frontier which they had to conquer or die in the attempt. [See the classic work by Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*] If the grand design of American culture may be described in this way, then one might suggest that the historical theme is repeated in the host of reality shows now inundating the airways. That suggestion would come with a crucial disclaimer, however, which we owe to Marx's famous observation in *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

The tragedy of America is part of the larger tragedy of the Americas. It is the story of genocide and environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale, perpetrated by European explorers and colonists turned loose on the New World, turned loose and intent on enriching themselves, on *winning* regardless of the cost in human lives and established ecosystems:

The discovery of America was followed by possibly the greatest demographic disaster in the history of the world. [*The Native Population of the Americas in 1492*, William M. Denevan, ed., 1992]

The extent of the carnage and catastrophe was not widely acknowledged for centuries after the event, although lone and immediately discredited voices were raised from the beginning (the work of Bartolomé de las Casas being an outstanding example). It might be hoped that the mistake would have been corrected by the young discipline of cultural anthropology, which in the United States came of age through exhaustive studies of Native American societies. [See the impressive volumes of the *Bureau of American Ethnology*] To its lasting shame, however, the foremost authorities on those groups, Alfred Kroeber, dean of American anthropology, and Julian Steward, editor of the canonical *Handbook of South American Indians*, grossly underestimated the indigenous population of the Americas. In a flagrant display of professorial arrogance, Kroeber and Stewart dismissed population figures of thirty-five to fifty million advanced by Las Casas and other scholars as the inflated and fanciful

work of non-specialists. Instead, Kroeber proposed a figure of 8.4 million and Steward 15.6 million. ["Native American population." *American Anthropologist*, n.s., vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 1-25. Alfred Kroeber, 1934; Julian Steward, *Handbook*] With their influence in the field, those numbers were not seriously challenged for decades. They provide a jarring contrast with the best current estimates of indigenous population at the time of Columbus' arrival: 54 to 75 million. [see Denevan] Tens of millions perished from smallpox, measles, influenza, and massacres, and the response by anthropologists was to count moccasin beads and record the quaint customs of the few survivors.

On a smaller scale, the tragedy of America unfolded in an especially agonizing manner: in the Rocky Mountain west with the coming of the mountain men and their exploitation by the first of the robber barons, John Jacob Astor and his American Fur Company. Perhaps no figure in American history or legend is imbued with the independence and supreme competence of the mountain man: living by his wits in a wild and hostile land, he survived hunger, bitter winters, and Indian attacks. And not only survived, he triumphed. In the best American tradition, he *won*. At least for a couple of decades. Even before the beaver began to run out and European tastes changed to silk, legendary mountain men like Jim Bridger, John Colter, and John "Liver-Eating" Johnson (most definitely *not* the individual portrayed by Robert Redford in *Jeremiah Johnson*) felt the pressure to abandon their independent lifestyle in favor of a more regimented existence as employees of a fur company. It was a fundamental change in a nascent American culture: the freest of men became pawns in a new world of big business crafted by Astor and later robber barons such as Leland Stanford and Cornelius Vanderbilt. Astor and the others had learned the secret of capitalist alchemy: how to change the blood and sweat of others into gold for themselves.

With the advent of reality television, the tragedy of America has returned as farce. Astor and the robber barons have given way to an even more crushing economic force: multinational corporations which sponsor television shows carefully designed by media giants to bring in the circus audiences with their consumer dollars (an insidious refinement of the early Roman political palliative, with the masses now supplying bread for their masters). The most popular shows, *Survivor* and *American Idol*, have replaced immensely brave and talented personalities like Bridger and Johnson with shallow caricatures of heroes and heroines who submit themselves to the abuse of the shows' directors and judges in return for a shot at fame and fortune. It is a pathetic charade of competition in which even the supreme American value, winning, has lost its meaning, become a minor ripple in the onrushing torrent of 24/7 cable news. Who were last year's winners of *Survivor* and *American Idol*? Or the year before, or the year before that? No one knows; no one cares; it doesn't matter at all; the circus opens tonight under the big top/screen with a new cast of stunted, superficial characters ready to endure any humiliation for a moment of glory. And we, the American multitudes, will be glued to our sets.

In what Nietzsche might have called an example of world-historical irony, one season of *Survivor* managed to take things beyond farce into sheer travesty and thereby expose a fundamental but contingent premise of American culture: competition and reward are inseparably linked. Who could disagree with that premise, which is the basis of the American experience from grade school to the grave, the underlying force at school, at work, at play, and, in its distilled essence, reality television? You compete, win, and are rewarded with trophies, money, adulation. You compete, lose, and are rejected and forgotten.

As with all previous seasons, *Survivor* embraced this premise in its 2009 installment: *Survivor: Tocantins – The Brazilian Highlands*. Set on the Tocantins River, a tributary of the Amazon in north-central Brazil, the show followed its usual format of dividing the sixteen contestants into two “tribes,” thus underscoring its adventure theme of primitive life in exotic locales. The names selected for the two tribes were Jalapao, after the region of Brazil where the show was filmed, and Timbira, the name of an actual tribe of Brazilian Indians whose survivors lived about a hundred miles from the *Survivor* camp. It would be interesting to know the circumstances behind the selection of the latter name; apparently it was done to add a touch of local color – American contestants playing at being actual indigenous Brazilians. The series unfolded with the usual ridiculous tasks, back-stabbing alliances, hidden immunity idols, the exile island, and elections to vote out unpopular players. The final election ended, as always, with a Sole Survivor, who took the million-dollar prize and became a television personality for a few days. Competition and reward, two sides of a coin.

The travesty perpetrated by the show’s directors on an unknowing and uncaring American audience was in selecting “Timbira” as a catchy name for one of the show’s “tribes.” For everything in actual Timbira life, with its traditional homeland a bare hundred miles away, contradicts the premise of competition-reward etched in American thought and exploited in the *Survivor* series. Had the directors and writers for *Survivor: Tocantins* bothered to do more than superficial background research in selecting a site for the 2009 show, they would have discovered an anthropological classic, *The Eastern Timbira* (URL: http://ia700305.us.archive.org/1/items/timbira/nimuendaju_1946_timbira.pdf), by one of the foremost ethnographers in the discipline’s brief history, Kurt Nimuendajú.

The Timbira are one of several groups associated with the Gê linguistic-cultural stock found throughout central Brazil (others include the Sherente, Shavante, and Apinayé). [In addition to Nimuendajú’s monograph, for a thorough discussion of Timbira culture see *The Dream and the Dance: A Comparative Study of Initiatory Death*, available at www.peripheralstudies.org] A prominent institution of these groups, and one elaborated in intricate detail by the Timbira, is the log race. For the race the Timbira form two teams whose membership is based on one of several dual divisions, or moieties, in the social organization of the village (age set moieties, rainy season moieties, plaza group moieties, ceremonial group moieties – theirs is, indeed, an intricate society). The teams travel several miles from

the village into the *galleria* forest, where they cut two sections of *burity* palm, each weighing 150-200 pounds. The race begins with a member of each team shouldering the heavy, cumbersome log and running at full speed toward the village. When he tires the log is handed off in mid-stride to a second runner and so on until the exhausted runners reach the village and deposit their logs in designated ceremonial locations. A classic competition with a race to the finish line? A race with winners and losers (hopefully none of whom have ingested performance-enhancing drugs that could be detected by a Timbira chapter of the USADA)? No, on the contrary, the Timbira undertake the grueling competition for its own sake: it is a race in which the purpose is *to race*, not to celebrate a winner and denigrate the losers.

Log races form the national sport not only of all the Timbira (p. 141 f.), including the Apinaye, but probably of all Northwestern and Central Gê. None of the other numerous observances that characterize the public life of these tribes has so deeply roused the attention of civilized observers. This is primarily because, next to the girls' dances in the plaza, log racing is the most frequently repeated ceremony; further, it stands out for its dramatic impressiveness.

And now we come to the feature that remains incomprehensible to Brazilians and leads to his constantly ascribing ulterior motives to this Indian game: The victor and the others who have desperately exerted themselves to the bitter end receive not a word of praise, nor are the losers and outstripped runners subject to the least censure; there are neither triumphant nor disgruntled faces. The sport is an end in itself, not the means to satisfy personal or group vanity. Not a trace of jealousy or animosity is to be detected between the teams. Each participant has done his best because he likes to do so in a log race. Who turns out to be the victor or loser makes as little difference as who has eaten most at a banquet (Nimuendajú 1946: 136, 139).

The farce Marx chronicles in *Eighteenth Brumaire* pales in comparison with the travesty of *Survivor: Tocantins*, Had old Karl been around to view the show, it would have had him clawing at his carbuncles and begging for mercy: Stop! No more of the utter absurdity of human existence! (After all, that is supposed to obey the laws of historical determinism, not chaos). Louis Bonaparte, that caricature of Napoleon, doesn't begin to compare with the mediocrities paraded on *Survivor*.

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In its obsession with competition and reward, American culture manages to trivialize athletic activity beyond recognition, to destroy the inherent joy of *doing*. Running or riding a bicycle, along with hitting a baseball, throwing a football, swimming, and skiing may be done

for the sheer enjoyment of the activity, of experiencing one's body in concerted motion. Breath-hold diving over a coral reef, open-water swimming in Puget Sound (see Edwin Dobb's brilliant essay, "Immersed in the Wild," URL: <http://www.hcn.org/issues/42.11/immersed-in-the-wild>), skiing a winding mountain trail beneath a stratospheric blue sky, running for miles along a deserted country road, can be, like the Timbira log race, ends in themselves, instances of genuine *re-creation* that transport the individual to another realm of being. That experience is close to the exhilaration described by those 13th century Provençal troubadours, whose *gai saber* or joy-in-knowing/doing Nietzsche commemorated in *The Gay Science*, echoing his own dedication to careful experimentation (*suchen* and *versuchen*) rather than to methodical system-building. To resort to a term no longer fashionable, it is about the *quest*.

It becomes almost impossible for us to capture that sense of exhilaration when our daily existence is subject to a practice that governs American life: *keeping score*. What did you get on the Chem test? How fast did you run the mile? How did you do on the SATs? What number is on your paycheck? How big is your house? Your car? Even, for God's sake, your dick? (Time to email that order for Viagra – comes in a plain brown wrapper! But, oops, definitely a performance-enhancing drug!). All these questions and countless others like them are distilled in what we do for fun – or have others do for us: sports. Guys who could not manage even to run the bases sit slumped in seats at Yankee Stadium, cradling scorecards they can barely see over their beer bellies, but they *keep score*. The activity itself, the lived experience of superbly conditioned athletes on the field is reduced to a pile of lifeless statistics, the raw material for an endless stream of other numbers that eventually lead to selecting The Winner, the Sole Survivor in American society's reality show of Life.

These absurd questions and activities which permeate and shape all of life in America conceal a monumental irony, a cosmic joke: Our obsessive need to keep score, to identify and reward those who are very good at what they do, may well lead to missing or misinterpreting truly exceptional individuals who fall outside the limited perspectives of the all-too-ordinary individuals who pass judgment on them.

There is a story here, really an apocryphal anecdote (it is an Einstein story and, like most, probably *is* apocryphal). It concerns an organization that is one of the most prominent scorekeepers in the country and, increasingly, around the world: the Educational Testing Service, creator and administrator of the SATs which have impacted the lives of oh-so-many Americans. From an early age children with some intelligence are taught to dread the SATs; they are told that a high score may advance their chances of becoming a professional or a manager of some sort, and thus joining that shrinking middle class (nineteen per cent and going down) which Domhoff described (see above). A low or even average score may doom a child of a family with ordinary means to a difficult life of labor and menial jobs; he will

sink into that vast pool of eighty per cent of the population who are just surviving. The story goes like this:

It seems that when the ETS was just getting organized in the late 1940s, its button-down executives were anxious to determine the effectiveness of the math section in particular – mathematical facts being irrefutable, they wished to calibrate their set of questions so that the test would accurately identify how students performed on a scale of dull to brilliant. Since the ETS was located in the intellectual Mecca of Princeton, New Jersey, someone had a bright idea: just up the road, at the Institute for Advanced Study, there was an individual who was making quite a stir in the world of mathematics and physics, one Albert Einstein. Why not have him take the SAT math test they had just put together? Certainly he would establish a benchmark against which young test-takers could be ranked. So they approached Einstein, he agreed, and they sat him down with the test. Now a major portion of the math SAT tests a student's ability to discern a pattern in a series of numbers. A question would supply a four-number series, say 2-4-6-8 and a multiple-choice set of possible answers, say 16, 24, 10, 1. The student is required to select the answer which best fits the pattern established by the four-number series, in this case the "10." As Einstein went through this section of the test, for each question he thought of an equation that would fit each of the multiple-choice possibilities. Then he picked the answer which gave him what he found to be the most interesting equation – almost always not the answer the test designers wanted.

This little experiment doubtlessly disappointed the ETS executives, but judging from the content of the SAT math test which has been inflicted on students for the past sixty-plus years, its results did nothing to dissuade them from their course of action. Einstein was obviously an anomaly, an oddball, and his toying with their sacred exam could safely be disregarded.

A thought which might have given them pause, but clearly did not occur to the right-thinking, compete-and-win executives of the ETS, is that if anomalies occur in so highly structured a world as theoretical physics, what bizarre deviations from agreed-on, socially acceptable norms might be found in other walks of life? In order to keep score it is necessary to have an authoritative scale, a means of ranking and grading individual performance. But there are in this life those rare individuals whose extraordinary gifts defy ranking; they go off the scales fixed by mediocrities like the executives of ETS. People are different, and a few people are so vastly different that it is senseless to tabulate, to *score* their performance. In a catch phrase from the failed cultural revolution of the late 1960s, now but a sad and haunting

memory, there are indeed the haves and have-nots, but there are also the have-something-elses. Those remarkable individuals either go off the charts or, more often and tragically, fall between the cracks of the charts. In that case their exceptional ability, which initially establishes them as stars (or what our punitive society would call “persons of interest”) dooms them to censure and sometimes ruin when they allow their exceptional abilities, whether in mathematics (John Nash), chess (Bobby Fischer), engineering (Nikola Tesla), aviation (Chuck Yeager), philosophy (Friedrich Nietzsche), poker (Stu Ungar), or, in the case at hand, bicycle racing (Lance Armstrong), to run afoul of standards of acceptable behavior.

Even if we insist on maintaining scales to rank people, we encounter the next insuperable obstacle: There is not a single scale or even a few which adequately evaluate individual ability. Rather, there is a tangled multitude of scales which cross-cut and often conflict with one another, so that any attempt to implement one hopelessly distorts the overarching truth of boundless *difference*. As a thirteen-year old Lance Armstrong already possessed an unprecedented combination of raw physical ability and mental determination. Yet everything about his society and his immediate circumstances – he was, after all, named after a star wide-receiver of the Dallas Cowboys; such was his family tradition – led him to embrace organized sport as the means of realizing his potential. And that decision, taken in the context of a judgmental and punitive society, proved his undoing. None of us can experience or perhaps even imagine the tremendous stamina and mental toughness required to stay at the head of the pack of the Tour de France, day after day, year after year, but all too many of us are quite prepared to thwart those remarkable displays, to declare them illegal, not sufficiently “healthy and clean” for the fearful and vengeful herd of non-entities that makes up American society.

A parting thought:

The vast sea of seven billion human beings awash on this fragile planet, those multitudes, are akin to the night sky – dark, without depth or substance, obscure, formless. That sea makes up a background for the stars, each star impossibly isolated from the others, alone, blazing in the dark immensity of space, each with its own history, its birth, evolution, and death. There is no race course, no set of standardized tests, no *contest* of any description that a star must strive to win. The star’s light radiates aimlessly, forever, illuminating the darkness of space and imparting to it whatever form it may possess. Here or there its beams happen to strike a random atom, perhaps, on the rarest of occasions, an atom in the retina of a sentient being . . . That is all there is, that is the “career” of the star. Here or there . . . here or there an individual star blazes so brightly that it consumes itself, devours its own matter, reaching the point at which it collapses in on itself in a spectacular explosion, a supernova of cosmic proportions, incinerating or scorching everything around it. Then it sinks into oblivion forever. Lance Armstrong.



Th-th-th-that's all folks!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBzJGckMYO4>