

# THE RELEVANCE OF RELATIVISM

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Characteristically, the scientist has been primarily concerned with the description of observed phenomena, and the maintainance of a neutral position when an evaluative interpretation of his data is required. This sterile goal is similarly represented in the discipline of anthropology as a major requirement for those of the profession. Thus, to support and clarify this position, a concept has been adopted which was formally introduced by W. G. Sumner in 1906: Cultural Relativism. Other than reaffirming and elaborating upon Sumner's definition, the concept had not been seriously appraised until quite recently. Therefore, the doctrine of cultural relativism should be examined, for though it has contributed to the descriptive approach of our profession, it has done little to promote the relevance and the pertinence of the discipline.

Of the many definitions for cultural relativism, Herskovits has given us one of the most detailed and qualified accounts. In summary, he states that judgements are found to be attributable to the experiences which individuals have, and these experiences differ with each culture and its participants. Therefore, the evaluations of a particular society are valid only within the context and influence of its culture; and are relative only to the cultural background from which they are derived. Further, this relativity includes the facts of the physical world which are perceived through the same

"enculturative screen" as are values. (Herskovits 1967:48-9). Thus, from this definition, any statement which would claim to be of an absolute nature would be invalid, for all experiences are conditioned through a cultural looking glass.

Upon appraisal, the above definition is, in itself, quite limiting and may produce some rather unsatisfactory situations. Among these, one finds that the thesis, by its own description, should not be considered as valid outside of the confines of the culture within which it was formulated. (The thesis is the product of one particular cultural frame of reference: the democratic thought of Western society.) Further, the facts established by the physical sciences of our Western world (as well as, the facts which are derived from a cross-cultural ethnographic study) are invalid simply because such data is relative only to its respective cultural context! Such embarrassing situations, however, are methodological problems and not the focal point of this paper, though it should be obvious that a definitional structure of this nature cannot lend itself to the production of a sound theory which may be readily used by anthropologists.

As for the intent of the cultural relativism doctrine, the surface presents itself as being applicable to modern situations with which the anthropologist may be confronted, for the concept bespeaks of tolerance and understanding for the values and beliefs of other peoples and cultures. As a result, an impression is given that the values of tolerance and understanding are an universally accepted phenomena, and are the answer to

"the ills of mankind." In promoting this view, however, two very significant situations are ignored. First, the historical frame of reference of some cultures is not recognized, for there may be no prior basis for the inferred value of variety or the need for respect. Thus, the acceptance of such a concept of cultural relativism and its proposals would be highly unfeasible and virtually unacceptable for them. Secondly, in asking for tolerance, the concept may become inapplicable in situations outside of the laboratory. When faced with such atrocities as those of Nazi Germany or Brazil, the anthropologist may rely on his "citizen" culture, and denounce his discipline, which claims to be the "study and understanding of man." Unquestionably, if his study and its facts in reference to relativism are valid, he should not find it necessary to abandon them. If he does, the discipline to which he adheres must be classified as nothing more than a myth and purely irrelevant.

As a final point of criticism, cultural relativism tends to do little more than promote the status quo. When deduced to a simple statement, the intent of its position may read as follows: "What is, is good." To be objective, and delete the statement's tolerant implications, it would merely state: "What is, is." If this be the case, then our science has not moved forward in the least. In holding such a position, one will find it difficult to deal with the phenomena of change in cross-cultural situations. (Herskovits illustrates this very well when he can give no general statement about cultural dynamics, other than change occurs in a variety of ways.)

Thus, what the position of relativism promotes, is merely a sentimentalistic, naively optimistic, and prejudiced concept in relation to cultural change. (Bidney 1962:443) It calls for the preservation of nothing more than a number of human zoos which may be cultivated for the interests of a few inquisitive young anthropologists and curiosity-seeking tourists. Therefore, with such inadequacies as those mentioned above, the concept of cultural relativism must be reappraised and limited in its application to acquire some degree of relevance; and another concept should be instituted which will apply to the existing situations of change and "crises" in the world.

In order to establish the relevance of relativism, as well as the discipline as a whole, anthropology must begin a search for cultural invariants. This, however, is not a proposal for a set of absolute values, but rather one for the initiation of a group of norms which may be accepted universally. The assumption that we should be or are a natural science and, in turn, remain neutral in the case of value judgements must be discarded. The pursuit of anthropology is a humane one, and cannot hold a neutral position. Only by presenting the various cultures we encounter with a set of feasible norms, will the discipline be able to promote the goal of relativism: the tolerance of and respect for other cultures.

This does not mean that the concept of relativism is completely irrelevant, for it cannot be wholly discounted. However, its relevance has mostly a methodological significance for the

collection and analysis of data. It must function as an aid in the evaluation of those norms which will prove to be universally feasible. Anthropology, and its "Golden Rule" (relativism), has been merely describing cultures for much too long a time. The discipline must now move on to prescriptions, evaluating ourselves and man in the process.

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