

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

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In the month of July, 1970 the mass media carried the story of the "tiger cage" prison at Con Son, South Vietnam. The revelation that political prisoners were being subjected to inhumane treatment by a political regime operating largely with the economic, political and military support of the United States shocked a substantial number of American citizens. What was perhaps more shocking was a series of statements by high level governmental officials in the United States that we should withhold our condemnation of the Saigon Government's prison methods because they were dictated by its own value system and not by ours. In other words, Americans were asked to sanction inhumane treatment of political prisoners because it was acceptable procedure in a society where life is supposedly "cheap" and brutality is more common and therefore more excusable.

Few anthropologists hearing this line of reasoning would not recognize that it was basically an employment of a very well established principle of anthropology - cultural relativism - once more being used to soften public reaction to certain kinds of objectionable behavior operating in a culture whose value is very different from our own.

The dilemma of determining what is "right" and what is "wrong" is, of course, frequently difficult within our own culture, but when such evaluation must cross cultural lines it

becomes even more difficult. Not too many years ago most anthropologists would have accepted the principle that the prison methods of the Saigon government were their own business and as good objective scientists they would have felt that it was quite proper to consider such behavior acceptable within the Vietnamese value system. Today, however, relatively few anthropologists would dismiss Con Son cruelty on the grounds of cultural relativism and this would lead one to suspect that perhaps it is time for a re-evaluation of this concept which has dwelt for so long near the heart of American anthropological theory.

While the idea of relativism has been around for a very long time in philosophical thought, the concept of cultural relativism as formulated by social scientists first came into fashion some fifty years ago when William Graham Sumner, in his book Folkways (1906), shocked his contemporaries by maintaining that even such practices as infanticide, headhunting, slavery, cannibalism, human sacrifice and religious prostitution were completely understandable in terms of certain cultural settings. Since they represented adaptations to particular circumstances these customs must be honored as justified and acceptable in an objective, scientific sense. A generation later, another champion of cultural relativism, Melville J. Herskovits, stressed that all cultures should be accorded equal dignity and be considered equally valid in spite of any customs which we as "civilized" Westerners might object to on the basis of our own code of ethics and morality. It was under the

chairmanship of Herskovits that the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association drew up the following statement on cultural relativism for the United Nations in 1947.

1. The individual realizes his personality through his culture: hence respect for individual differences entails a respect for cultural differences.
2. Respect for differences between cultures is validated by the scientific fact that no technique of qualitatively evaluating cultures has been discovered.
3. Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive, so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture must to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole.

Few anthropologists educated in America have had much quarrel with the general tenets of cultural relativism. Some have gone much farther in accepting the implications of the concept than others, however. For some it has merely represented a warning to seek local definitions for and attitudes toward the customs of the people they are studying in the field. Others have accepted cultural relativism as an edict to "live and let live", but others have gone the whole route, claiming that cultures practicing headhunting, cannibalism, infanticide, etc., were just as honorable as those which didn't and that no one had a right to condemn any form of behavior practiced by any people as long as their society sanctioned it.

While I believe that cultural relativism is a valuable tool in training students to study foreign cultures with an open mind, and while I believe that all societies could profit from a

little less ethnocentrism and a more tolerant attitude toward other peoples who are racially or culturally different, I cannot bring myself to respect "tiger cages", human torture or organized slaughter of human beings just because it is a cultural tradition of the people perpetrating these atrocities. Neither am I willing to accept My Lais, the collecting of Viet Cong ears as trophies or the pushing of prisoners of war from helicopters just because war is hell and it therefore has a moral code all its own.

As an anthropologist who has been trained in a discipline which values all human life, champions the underdog and applauds the cultural developments of prehistory which made man's life more secure and more comfortable I cannot bring myself to turn my back on human suffering or view death with a calloused eye in the name of cultural relativism.

Like Robert Redfield, I find that I simply cannot "look neutrally at the ideas that move history toward a more humane ideal and practice. I have placed myself squarely on the side of mankind and have not shamed to wish mankind well." (1953:141)

To a great extent the view which I have expressed above is shared by many other anthropologists today and has resulted in the condemnation of Project Camelot, the American Anthropological Association's Vietnam resolution and a growing body of published statements such as that of Stanley Diamond which appeared in the "Letters" section of the March 1, 1968 issue of Science. Here Diamond stated his objection to the idea of a value-free anthropology wherein scholars must only play the

role of the disinterested specialist whose loyalty is only to his methodology. "If anthropology is a science," writes Diamond, "it is a moral science," and it is the duty of the anthropologists, since we lay claim to great insight into the nature of human events, to take on the responsibility of helping to promote the survival and the cultural development of the human species.

Anthropologists have often excused their lack of effectiveness in finding solutions to human problems on the fact that anthropology is still a young science. We have said that we haven't found many answers but that we have asked some darn good questions. It is true that anthropology is a young science, but it will continue to exhibit the immaturity of youth until it develops a basis for moral and ethical judgment on a cross-cultural basis. We must establish a standard upon which to base criticism of those forms of human behavior which threaten man as a species or do him violence either physically or mentally. Like the "phony white liberal" who continues to claim that he likes all blacks (presumably because they are black) anthropology continues to like all cultures and all practices therein either because they were created by the "noble savage" or merely because they exist. Valuing all cultures equally is as unrealistic as other forms of stereotyping. Unless we have the courage and ingenuity to develop a yard stick for evaluating cultures we cannot judge the adequacy of any given culture to meet the needs and aspirations of its participants. Some cultures work better than others in sustaining human life and

promoting the human condition. Why are we afraid to say so? Native peoples are not only objects for study, they are human beings and they insist upon being treated as such. They insist upon being accepted or rejected as individuals who differ from one another in personality and behavior. Why can't we approach the multiplicity of cultures on the same basis? It is not enough that anthropologists classify and analyze cultural behavior; they must be critics of it as well.

One of the first fallacies we must rid ours of is that we are objective scientists who work in a value-free discipline. We have never been objective in our approach to primitive man and his culture. The idea that primitive man should be spared contamination by Western civilization has been a widely held notion for years and some anthropologists would even be happy to promote the idea of "human zoos" where primitive cultures could be isolated, untouched by the tainted hands of civilization. This is no more of an objective position than those conceived and carried out by AID people who openly admit they are in the business of changing people. The judgment that people should be left alone for their own good is clearly a subjective one. Many anthropologists (who are as delighted with the comforts and security of civilization as anyone) seem to have decided that the introduction of air conditioners, central heating and modern medicine would be degrading to all other peoples in the world except themselves.

Murdock (1965) has pointed out that the prevailing theory of cultural change has rested on the assumption that every

culture consists of learned behavior and thought that is transmitted with few modifications from one generation to the next. It implies that cultures have a kind of inertia that makes elements persist unless actively impeded or counteracted. He suggests that a better view would be that elements are supported by their success in meeting human needs. The contents of a culture are therefore cultural elements which have been tested or are being tested and found to be the best under prevailing conditions. One of these conditions is, of course, the state of knowledge.

It is naive to assume that the traits making up any culture are the best assemblage of traits possible. They represent only the best combination of traits that the members of the society have conceived of or have had the opportunity to borrow from other societies. With increased contact with other peoples, which normally results in expanded knowledge, many of the traits formerly considered adequate will be dropped in favor of more satisfying ones to which a society has been exposed. Many inhumane customs are continued, not because they are the best possible solutions to their problems, but because within the limited knowledge of the members of a society they are the best solutions which have occurred to them. It is even possible that some customs have no positive value at all but came into being as a result of peculiar sets of abnormal circumstances and continue to be practiced out of force of habit and out of a lack of awareness of how unproductive they are. It is even possible that there are sick cultures, just as there are sick

human beings, and that customs which work against the comfort and survival of man are products of a kind of cultural psychosis which the society cannot itself heal.

The matter of evaluation of customs cross-culturally is, of course, not likely to be a simple matter. While many anthropologists would agree that human sacrifice and human torture must be condemned they would not agree that other customs that civilized people oppose - such as plural marriage and indigenous belief systems - are objectionable. The job of developing standards of moral judgment will be a difficult one but it should be possible to glean from the writing and traditions of hundreds of great thinkers of the East and West, of the primitive and the modern world, a code of behavior which will best meet man's physical, social and psychological needs. It must be a code based on humaneness, love, freedom of participation and the right to live without fear of pain or hunger. We must develop this universal standard of moral and ethical behavior and then honor those societies which follow it and condemn those (even our own) which choose to violate it. It is high time that anthropology sharpened its theoretical tools and cultivated its conscience. The two need not be antithetical.

References

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