

THE “FUGITIVE TRUTH” OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

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Abstract: *Initially presenting a traditional point of view on the principle of cultural relativism, and then an updated perspective, as the philosopher of anthropology Clifford Geertz has conceived in his books, this article will finally try to emphasize the pragmatic difficulties which this principle still doesn't succeed in solving, as I believe.*

Keywords: *cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, otherness, multiculturalism, anti-anti-relativism, acculturation.*

Motto: *“To see ourselves as others see us, can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. If interpretive anthropology has any general office in the world it is to keep reteaching this fugitive truth.”*

(Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*)

1. The traditional view of cultural relativism

From the beginning, I wish to mention that I intend to refer to cultural relativism as a principle, thus entrusting social sciences, and especially cultural anthropology with the priority of transforming it into the useful aspect of a research method. Therefore, considering it not as a theory, or an ideology, or just a bunch of beliefs, but only as a successful principle in exploring other cultures, I'll be trying to follow the pragmatic consequences it has in particular cases of *acculturation*; that is, in the situation of two cultures interacting with each other and changing each other to a certain extent, depending on the influential power they have.

As the Romanian author Andrei Marga clearly offers in one of his books dedicated to this topic, a display of different types of relativism, we find out that cultural relativism could be summarized in two characteristic assertions:

a) cultural facts always have a genesis context, and thus, they also have a non-transferable context-related significance;

b) any sort of conceived *Weltanschauung* is only one perspective among the others, so no *Weltanschauung* could possibly be superior to all the others. (translation: C. M.)¹

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¹ Andrei Marga, *Relativism and Its Consequences. Relativismul și consecințele sale*, Cluj University Press, 2007, p. 93.

In his introductory book *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* James Rachels had also shown what can be learned from cultural relativism, what its two main benefits are for our moral thought and life, and for our societies and cultures. (Of course, both authors extensively refer to its inconsistencies or inconveniences as well, but my intention here is to focus on its best, in order to show then how *its best* still couldn't be effective in some matters of acculturation.)

– *The first benefit* is this: it reminds us about the danger of assuming that all our preferences and practices are based on some rational, universal or trans-cultural standard, while many of them (but not all) are merely peculiar to our society, they are social conventions.

– *The second benefit* is this: it helps us avoid arrogance or dogmatism and keep an open mind, as we realize that some of our strong feelings acquired in the growing up process might be the reflection of the prejudices of our society and culture, or only cultural conditioned perceptions.

After emphasizing the logical flows of relativism's arguments, then the consequences of taking it seriously and the presumed common values of all cultures, he concludes by showing why it has been such an influential topic in the philosophical debates:

*"We can understand the appeal of Cultural Relativism, then, even though the theory has serious shortcomings. It is an attractive theory because it is based on a genuine insight – that many of the practices and attitudes we think so natural are really only cultural products. [...] But we can accept these points without going on to accept the whole theory."*¹

2. The "When-in-Rome" perspective

Anthropology is by its nature the very domain where cultural diversity was conceptualized, and from which the theories on this issue emerged onto the area of social and humanistic sciences and philosophy. Its main concept of *otherness* refers to the study of other cultures, that is, other than the researcher's own culture.

Cultural diversity, as a concept referring to the irreducible plurality of cultures on the globe, each one having its value and its world, beyond comparison or hierarchy, is having the roots in the methodological principle of relativism, which anthropology has sustained in opposition with a prejudice – *ethno-centrism*; the assumption that European Western culture should represent the standard, were we to judge any other culture.

According to the opposite methodological principle, any foreign culture which is to be studied by an anthropologist in his research field should be approached by its own local standards, and not by those belonging to the researcher's culture, or to another "dominant" culture. Although widely debated and controversial in other domains, especially in moral philosophy, this principle has served very well the entire field discipline, making the development of lots of currents possible, schools and branches, all based on the participative observation

¹ James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill, 1986, Inc., p. 24.

of the study object, and on researcher's empathy in integration into the studied foreign culture.

In the recent decades, the promotion of cultural diversity took the form of an almost ideological trend, although it should be more of an axiological one, namely, *multiculturalism*: the approach to discovering, observing, describing, valuing, preserving, and respecting cultural diversity.

Nowadays, anthropology seems to have been playing a vanguard role in the debates on (cultural) relativism since 2000, as Geertz was mentioning in his book, *Available Light*. He sets here a list of some general anthropological contributions to our cultural history, all these in the form of empirical conclusions. In the same time, he gives some ironical replies to Euro-centric claims which he is spotting under the labels of rationalism or neo-rationalism. The list comprises the following¹:

- political order is possible without centralized power;
- principled justice is possible without codified rules;
- the world does not divide into the pious and the superstitious;
- there are sculptures in jungles and paintings in deserts;
- the norms of reason were not fixed in ancient Greece;
- the evolution of morality is not consummated in England.

The two main trends brought by anthropology in contemporary thought – says Geertz – are: *the repositioning of horizons* and *the de-centering of perspectives*. Thus, the relativist principle which he is sustaining sounds (in a rather traditional form) like this: “*Peoples of different cultures live in different worlds.*”² For him, culture does not represent the core of the study anymore; the new attitude of de-centering requires an *actor-oriented* study. It means treating the culture more as a *context*, as a system of symbols, somehow modular, not anymore as a whole, as an essence imprinting specific power to its components. In fact, he refuses any discourse about human nature, or the universal nature of mind, or the universal truth, as mere intellectual strategies and criteria for clinging to the immanent authority or superiority of our culture over the others, or as “lost simplicities” that worked well enough in the past, but there is no need to revive them now.

“... it would be, I think, a large pity if, now that the distances we have established and the elsewheres we have located are beginning to bite, to change our sense of sense and our perception of perception, we should turn back to old songs and older stories in the hope that somehow only the superficial need alter and that we shan't fall off the edge of the world.”³

The field researchers are convinced by their experience that cultural diversity is not a simple surface, and that otherness is irreducible to some common grounds

¹ C. Geertz, *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, New Jersey, 2000, Princeton University Press, p. 65.

² *Idem*, p. 63.

³ *Ibidem*.

suggested by “wistful ecumenicalism”, or by “aggressive scientism” – as he put it. So, for a successful inquiry, they adopt another proverbial form of the relativist principle: “*When in Rome, act like a Roman!*”. And what they are saying is there’s no way in reducing or translating one’s contextual acting-like-a-Roman into a civilized practice, or a literal fact which could be understood from outside. Using a metaphor, Geertz speaks about the typical anthropological practice like this:

“Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory, is what anthropology has been all about. At least, that is what it has been all about, as I, no nihilist, no subjectivist, and possessed, as you can see, of some strong views as to what is real and what is not, what is commendable and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not, understand it. We have, with no little success, sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers. It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle. [...] we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchant of astonishment”¹.

3. What if Rome comes to us?

The conclusion of the entire chapter (named “Anti Anti-Relativism”) of *Available Light* is, in my opinion, characterized by partiality, which might be leading us to a sense of disappointment; after all, the author is not only an anthropologist and could not retire to such a partial view, after involving in his discourse large philosophical topics: “*If we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home*”² – he concludes.

By calling the anthropologists “merchants of astonishment”, pointing out realities out of place and things that don’t fit in our worlds, I think he’s mentioning only a part of their work and professional attitude. But the difficulties appear when they trespass the relativist principle themselves.

Let me illustrate this by quoting John J. Honigmann, another American anthropologist who speaks (as an editor) about field work in terms like these: it requires an adaptation of the researcher, because an attitude of absolute neutrality toward certain behaviors, “that are considered delinquent in our own culture”, couldn’t be successful. The cultural relativism requires him, on the basis of the lack of axiological hierarchy, “to eschew negative value judgments concerning the morality, goodness, or aesthetic worth of behavior encountered in the research community”. So, he might need to behave accordingly to the when-in-Rome principle towards local cultural norms, “even if the same aspects are condemned in his own culture.”³ As a researcher, he writes:

Perhaps the field trip allowed me, at the age of thirty, to work off unresolved elements of revolt against the conventions of my own culture, or to release other expressive components of my personality. Undoubtedly my

¹ *Idem*, p. 64.

² *Idem*, p. 65.

³ J. Honigmann, ed., *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Chicago, Rand McNally and Company, 1973, p. 255.

*attitudes toward sex, drinking, and similar aspects of Kaska life also sprang from the spirit of cultural relativity I had cultivated since first encountering it in 1940*¹.

As we can observe, there is a rising difficulty when embracing cultural relativism: namely, one's tendency to become a chameleonic observant: ignoring the criterion of cultural context of a norm or value, and developing prejudices and critiques of one's own culture, in one's process of adapting or adopting other culture's norms and values. This is nothing but another form of ethno-centrism, only having its poles shifted. Otherwise, respecting both cultures in their irreducible specific and context, one should vigilantly avoid negative value judgments of one's own culture as well. This phenomenon of *reversed ethno-centrism* shows us that the anthropologist's behavior might not be quite consistent with their principle.

Another famous argument against the plausibility of this principle, which being famous I will not insist on it, is that no one could possibly stick to a foreign culture till one reached the perfect empathy, neither could completely remove the imprint of one's own culture. In other words, no one can be as "native" as the natives. So, a negative consequence might be for one to become a non-native and a non-adapted towards each culture, by their kind. After all, how can we trust that one's shifted behavior, for the adaptation's sake, is in one's cultural, social, political, religious, or moral benefit, especially when returning home?

All these lead us to think that maybe the (neo-)rationalists such as Gellner, Rachels, or Marga, are right to talk about social, moral, and philosophical negative consequences of cultural relativism. After all, it is hard to believe it could be functioning isolated, only for the benefit of the privileged anthropology, and without any implications on the other mentioned cultural areas. For example, Gellner argues that the difference between our culture's beliefs about reality and some other culture's beliefs about reality is not an argument that what we believe is not the correct "One True Vision".² Rachels also comes with this argument: in some societies people believe the Earth is spherical, and in others people believe the Earth is flat. But it doesn't follow from this disagreement that there's no "objective truth" on this matter³.

A. Marga formulates an anti-relativist pragmatic argument like this:

*"relativism is always converting itself very quickly into a dogma, which contradicts with the principle and involves a rough consequence: the destroying of the principle of human specie's unity, with all its ethical, political and social implications."*⁴ (translation: C. M.)

In my opinion, the principle of cultural relativism shows its difficulties and even its major violent consequences in the area of acculturation. If we are to

¹ *Apud idem*, p. 256, in M. Freilich, ed., 1970, *Marginal Natives*, chapter "Field Work In Two Northern Canadian Communities", New York, Harper & Row.

² *Apud Geertz, Available Light*, p. 62.

³ J. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, p. 16.

⁴ A. Marga, *Filosofia unificării europene*, Cluj, Editura Biblioteca Apostrof, 1995, p. 97.

maintain the impossibility of value hierarchy of cultures, and the urge to respect every one's local knowledge, contextual truth, cultural perception of the same reality, then how shall we solve the potential conflicts rising between ethnical groups in the same community? Or how will a society calm down the pressure of one increasing minority over changing the very society that adopted it? Recently, *New York Times* and other newspapers have printed titles and news like this: "David Cameron, the prime minister of Great Britain: Multiculturalism feeds Islamic extremism", "Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy made similar comments"¹. The issue is that certain minorities, although living in democratic societies with liberal values, might not respect such values, promoting instead their own, as a result of their increasing influence on a social and demographic basis.

It seems that what made the mentioned officials to claim that multiculturalism has failed and that the Western countries should strongly defend their liberal values is the pragmatic reason. Other intellectual reasons for attacking multiculturalism as a value, and implicitly the consequences of relativist principle, may not be so visible and urgent, but the pragmatic one is.

In my opinion, we witness an important shift in our axiological vision of world and culture. There seems to be the third great shift, from anthropology's perspective and it is happening also under its cultural impact.

The first occurred when Western people have been animated in their imagination by the first ethnological testimonies, made initially by navigators, merchants, missionaries, slave masters, soldiers, wanderers travelling in colonies and in all the freshly discovered lands. After that, the testimonies of cabinet anthropologists, more documented, but not accurate in data and interpretations and characterized by Euro-centrism, made the civilized world's imagery to burst and forge a new value: the value of *exotic*, which was replacing the simple old notion of *foreign*, not appealing at all. The *exotic* was going well with Euro-centrism, because the things that were valued as exotic had the aura of long distance, rareness and isolation (as the island became the prototype location for any virtual paradise). In the same time, the remote exotic cultures were not interfering with the old continent, so the influence was unidirectional and controlled.

Once the anthropology became a field science, at the beginning of the 20-th century with Franz Boas, it radically changed its methods and principles, de-centered the vision of cultures and replaced the prejudicial ethno- or Euro-centrism with the principle of cultural relativism. This was the second major shift. Another value was born out of its exotic "ancestor", the one of *cultural diversity*. But as the world evolved, the remote cultures became our neighbors, the islands became enclaves or minorities in our societies, and all the interactions between communities developed the phenomenon of acculturation, which took various forms, not harmonious every time.

¹ <http://www.ziare.com/david-cameron/premier-marea-britanie/david-cameron-multiculturalismul-cultura-extremismul-islamic-1073455>

So, nowadays, the relativist principle seems to be real fugitive and to leave room for something else. The conflicts between communities having different and irreconcilable values and norms, about which relativism tells us only they all are right and they have no common platform for negotiation, might explode. Maybe Dan Sperber was right when he was ironically describing the open mind attitude of tolerance-no-matter-what as naïve, as just an attitude of more or less elaborate “hand-waving” that is “conformist”, “false-profound”, “misleading”, “hermeneutico-psychedelic” and “self-serving”¹. Harsh words. But, even if we don’t agree with him, even if there is no doubt for us that, when in Rome, we shall act like Romans, maybe we’ll be wondering someday in the future: what about the “Romans” not having this principle in their culture and not accepting it in the culture that adopted them? In other words, what if Rome comes to us?

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¹ C. Geertz, *Available Light*, p. 63.