

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MULTICULTURALISM

[Editor's Note: The following article on Anthropology and Multiculturalism is composed of two sections: an Introduction by Ruth O. Selig and excerpts from "Multiculturalism, Cultural Relativism, and Competing Perspectives on the Encounter," by Lawrence B. Breitborde, published in the March 1992 issue of *Social Education*.]

Introduction

At an informal party, among strangers, a majority of non-Indians try to make talk with whoever will listen. They feel compelled to act, to make contact, to cover their uneasiness with talk, with action. Traditional Indians, on the other hand, will stand or sit quietly, saying nothing, watching, learning, trying to discover what is expected of them, and speaking only when they are sure of themselves. White people find their place by active experimentation, Indians by quiet alertness. One Indian said about a white acquaintance, "He'd rather be wrong than silent" (*Teaching the Native American*, edited by Hap Gilliland, et. al., 1988).

Jose Ybarra and Edmund Jones are at the same party and it is important for them to establish a cordial relationship for business reasons. Each is trying to be warm and friendly, yet they will part with mutual distrust and their business transaction will probably fall through. Jose, in Latin fashion, moved closer and closer to Edmund as they spoke, and this movement was miscommunicated as pushiness to Edmund, who kept backing away from this intimacy, and this was miscommunicated to Jose as coldness. The silent languages of Latin and English cultures are more difficult to learn than their spoken languages ("The Sounds of Silence" by Edward and Mildred Hall, 1971).

During this past year, several anthropologists have addressed the issues of "Cultural

Diversity" and "Multiculturalism," and the role anthropology should be playing in helping students and teachers face the challenges of an increasingly diverse and changing world. (See "Points of View: Multiculturalism and Museums," by Ruth O. Selig in *Anthro.Notes*, Fall 1992). Anthropology is not a central player in the growing debate over issues of diversity, equity, and multiculturalism in schools, or in universities as Richard J. Perry points out in his article, "Why do Multiculturalists Ignore Anthropologists." (Richard J. Perry, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 1992: A52). As Perry wryly states, "most anthropologists hope that we can play a part. But many of us are taken aback by our empty dance cards."

As Perry says, the issues that appear central to educators concerned with multiculturalism--"the concept of culture, cultural relativism, the interpretation of other systems of thought, and so on--have been central to anthropology throughout this century," yet anthropologists are scarcely included in the debates on university campuses across the nation. In addition, anthropologists find some of the approaches of the new multiculturalists questionable because they are based on a simplistic concept of culture and a "visceral" approach to understanding other cultures. "They communicate a sense that one can bypass tedious scholarly discussions of kinship systems, economic patterns, and food-getting strategies of "others" and go straight for what it 'feels like' to be one of them."

Perry accuses the new multiculturalists of naivete, particularly in dealing with cultural relativism that is commonly confused with moral relativism. "Cultural relativism does not...mean that all human behavior merits approval. It only means that to understand what people do, it is more useful to ask why they do it than to decide whether or not they should." Four months after Perry's article, the President of the American Anthropological Association, Annette B. Weiner, wrote a second piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "Anthropology's Lessons for Cultural Diversity" (July 22, 1992:B2). Like Perry, Weiner decries the fact that "anthro-

pology's insights into studying and representing multiple cultural identities... are ignored by most participants in today's debates. As the multicultural controversy has gained increasing public attention, anthropologists have remained silent--perhaps discouraged by the simplistic assumptions about cultural identity promulgated by those on the right and the far left."

Weiner's article goes on to describe the anthropological understanding of culture as it developed through time, and in particular Franz Boas' contributions and battles in the early 20th century to combat ethnocentrism and racism. Boas strove to foster respect for cultural diversity in an atmosphere of hostility and determination to use public schooling to "enforce assimilation of ethnic minorities into the dominant American culture." Weiner's article ends with a clarion call to anthropologists:

It is time for anthropologists to help other scholars redefine multiculturalism as a movement that finally takes us beyond the ethnocentrism and fear that so deeply shaped the history of this country. The challenge remains--as it was in the 19th century--to foster multiple ways of understanding cultural differences, thus creating a more equitable society without feeding the forces of racism and ethnocentrism once again.

In his article, Lawrence B. Breitborde considers at length the relevance of anthropology to the Quincentenary and to the debate over multiculturalism. Breitborde welcomes Columbus Day as a challenge for us "to help students--and ourselves--understand how groups separated by cultural differences can be integrated into a larger, coherent society." In the article, Breitborde offers an extended analysis of the concept of cultural relativism and thereby offers one concrete way in which anthropology can help teachers and students understand their increasingly diverse world.

Cultures are constantly being negotiated by the culture-bearers. Someone enculturated into one culture but operating in another is

often faced with two sets of cultural rules. He or she may choose one or the other set of rules, modify either so that it is even more different in order to emphasize his or her distinctiveness, negotiate a compromise between the two, or create something entirely new. While Breitborde's article does not address the complexity of cultures in contact in a multi-cultural nation such as the United States, *Anthro.Notes* editors plan to publish on this topic in the future.

Ruth O. Selig

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CULTURAL RELATIVISM

[Below are excerpts from "Multiculturalism, Cultural Relativism, and Competing Perspectives on the Encounter" by Lawrence B. Breitborde]

Anthropology... provides a perspective by which [we can] make sense of the world in which we live, including the cacophony of competing views, values and perceptions. What anthropology offers is **cultural relativism**, a concept that has fallen out of favor in recent years.

The classic definition of **cultural relativism** is that perspective by which any aspect of behavior or custom is understood in the context of the culture of which it is part. Its opposite is, of course, ethnocentrism, by

which one would use the values and standards of one's own culture to evaluate (erroneously) the meaning of behaviors or customs of another culture. Ethnocentrism distorts the meaning and function of a particular custom by detaching it artificially from its immediate cultural context. Cultural relativism allows us to see how particular customs, values and beliefs fit together, providing a sense of the world as a particular community understands it.

...Anthropology brought the world cultural relativism as a corrective to ethnocentrism. It has become a concept powerful in its simplicity: Understand the behavior of other groups in their own terms and from their own perspective.

Critics of Cultural Relativism

All along, there have been critics of this concept. The concern most widely known outside universities, and the one that has often brought cultural relativism into disfavor in the current debates on multiculturalism, is about values. When we consider behavior only in the context of the culture of which it is part, we discover time and again that there is almost always a clear sense, a rationale, for the behavior under scrutiny--that behaving makes sense in a culturally defined way. What might, from our own ethnocentric point of view, appear to be appalling, evil, or stupid, will, from the context of the culture of which it is part, make sense and may even meet the local definition of goodness and virtue. More alarming is the implication that no absolute definitions or standards exist or can exist for virtue and evil; in this sense, cultural relativism leads to moral bankruptcy.

Worse still, in assessing the value of other people's customs in terms of their own cultures, we simultaneously relativize our own customs and beliefs. Our ways of behaving, our values, and our notions of good and evil become just another way that a culture (this time, our own) has arranged things. In this view, everything is quite arbitrary. Anthropologists' gift to the world, cultural relativism, leads to a

recognition of the arbitrariness of all cultures and values.

These fears are confirmed outside of anthropology; social critics have not spared cultural relativism or its anthropological proponents from blame for the increasing social divisiveness and moral decay they see in our society. In his recent critique of higher school education in the United States, for example, Allan Bloom singles out anthropologists and relativism for special attention:

Sexual adventurers like Margaret Mead and others who found America too narrow told us that not only must we know other cultures and learn to respect them, but we could also profit from them. We could follow their lead and loosen up, liberating us from the opinion that our taboos are anything other than social constraints. We could go to the bazaar of cultures and find reinforcement for inclinations that are repressed by puritanical guilt feelings...(Bloom 1987, 33; cited in Klass 1991, 356).

...On-going controversies about multiculturalism in our schools add fuel to these fires. For some time, most anthropologists deployed the concept of cultural relativism in the study of cultures other than our own. The debate on multi-culturalism, however, brings cultural relativism to intra-societal questions. Now we must ask how our own society will be able to hang together given the myriad cultural differences that characterize the population. We are forced to confront the search for common moral standards and values among groups whose cultural differences seem at times greater than their cultural commonalities. We have lost the luxury of approaching, as relativists, groups of people far removed from us by oceans and time; we now are challenged to approach, as relativists, people with whom we share our society--our cities, our schools, and other public institutions--but with whom we may differ in appearance, language, deportment, tastes, and values.

There is a historical irony about this most recent dilemma of cultural relativism. In

its formulation in the early 20th century, cultural relativism was shaped by political events in U.S. society. To a great extent, cultural relativism was an intellectual response to "bad" science deployed to justify restrictive immigration. The anthropologist Franz Boas and his students promoted relativism as a "relativist and anti-racist 'social scientific orientation to human differences'" (Handler 1990, 253). These early anthropologists, actively engaged in establishing anthropology as an academic discipline, directed much of their energies to (if not receiving their inspiration from) events outside their universities:

Boasians repeatedly spoke out against racism and national chauvinism, and in favor of pluralism and intercultural tolerance--in the early 1920s when American xenophobia reached hysteric proportions, during the economic depression of the 1930s, and during World War II.... Boasian anthropologists took seriously the duty of the scholar and scientist to make specialized knowledge accessible to the citizens of a modern society (Handler 1990, 253).

Now, decades later, we see relativism skewed for contributing to divisiveness within our own society, even though it was originally developed and promoted as a tool toward the formation of a U.S. society that would integrate diverse cultural groups on the basis of mutual respect and understanding.

The Original Concept of Multiculturalism

The historical social mission pursued by the early proponents of cultural relativism suggests that it might be useful for us to return to the original concept. What we discover is that as cultural relativism gained acceptability outside anthropology and outside the academy, certain of its features became diluted and misunderstood. I would suggest that by sharpening our understanding and appreciation of cultural relativism, we can recognize its continuing promise for helping us cope effectively with the challenges of a culturally diverse U.S. society.

Two features of cultural relativism should be underscored in the context of today's debates.

First, although cultural relativism forces us to search for a logic of behaviors, values, or perceptions according to the cultural system of which they are a part, this embedding of custom within its own cultural context should not be interpreted as leading to the view that cultural differences are arbitrary....

Cultural relativism leads us to see that customs are *not* arbitrary. Through such thinking, we should be led to explore anew our own customs, which we often take for granted: how does a particular value of ours, or one of our customary practices, make sense in terms of its contribution to the larger organization of our lives, to the position we occupy in society, or to external ecological or material circumstances of our community? Making our own values relative--viewing them in the larger comparative context of other groups' values--*has as much potential for strengthening our commitments to our own values as for weakening them.* Cultural relativism leads us to recognize that values and beliefs are necessary parts of a larger, complex cultural whole on which the continued functioning of communities and societies, including our own, depends. Thus, cultural relativism and anthropology can lead to an affirmation of our own way of life.

Second, in encouraging us to see the world from another group's point of view--that is, to understand what behavior, values, and perceptions mean to those who engage in or espouse them--cultural relativism leads not to a moral nihilism, but to a respect for the need of every human community (including our own) to have a cultural system by which individual and societal values are defined.

Cultural relativism, and the anthropological search for the sense that behavior makes, helps us recognize the necessity for all peoples, including groups within our society, to have some *particular* culture, some *particular* values, beliefs, and customs.

This recognition provides a basis for understanding that the cultural diversity we are part of in contemporary United States is neither ephemeral nor arbitrary. Such diversity is inevitable, given both our historical knowledge of the demography of our citizenry and our anthropological understanding of the way in which human groups function....

The cultural diversity of the U. S. population is not arguable. It is real. Our question is how to prepare students to live in a society that will continue to be characterized by cultural differences. We simply cannot begin to address this question without cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is necessary to help understand the nature of these differences, to recognize that they are real, that they are likely to persist, and that they are functional. In these terms, we must use cultural relativism to help students learn to *cross* cultural boundaries. As the distinguished anthropologist of education, John Ogbu, has written (1990:428-429, emphasis added):

Education in the context of cultural diversity is a process in which teachers and schools bear the responsibility of acquiring knowledge of the cultures and languages of minority and other nonmainstream students and using such knowledge to educate the students from

these groups. The other part, which complements the responsibility of teachers and the schools, is the willingness and efforts of students from different cultural and language backgrounds to learn and use the language and culture of the schools. *These students...must be willing to cross cultural boundaries and this does not require them to give up their own cultures and languages...*A true cultural diversity that promotes the academic success of minority students and other marginal populations is one that permits them to cross cultural and language boundaries without feeling threatened.

Elasticity and Flexibility of our Humanity

Finally, cultural relativism underscores an essential feature of our being on which the struggle to maintain our society depends: the elasticity and flexibility of our humanity. We *can* understand another culture and experience a culturally alternative point of view without losing our own. In a world of competing viewpoints, and in classrooms where cultural diversity, improperly understood, can lead to divisiveness rather than understanding, we need to underscore the affirming nature of cultural relativism.

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