Anthropological Perspectives

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Anthropology in a broad sense can be defined as the study of diversity through time and across space. It comprises two main fields: biological anthropology, which deals with biological diversity, and sociocultural anthropology, which deals with sociocultural diversity. Table 1 compares the characteristics of both anthropological approaches. This chapter explores the second field.

What perspective should anthropologists adopt in their work in order to achieve an accurate comprehension of sociocultural diversity? How should they proceed when entering a social universe so far unknown to them? What means should they implement to succeed in seeing the world through the eyes of the members of the society studied, to understand facts using their way of thinking, to feel as they feel? How do anthropologists manage to seize the meaning that another society gives to matters like birth, death, war or natural disaster? Assuming an anthropological perspective implies, on the one hand, a particular way of conducting fieldwork on the basis of in-depth surveys and participant observation, as Bronislaw Malinowski proposed to do from his own experience in the Trobriand Islands in the 1910s. Later on, fieldwork underwent a rapid and general diffusion in anthropology, and anthropologists have steadily improved and enriched fieldwork techniques throughout the twentieth century. These fieldwork techniques are discussed in the previous chapter.

Following an anthropological perspective implies, on the other hand, becoming familiar with some conceptual tools that should guide the anthropologist in fieldwork, both during the data collection phase and during the subsequent analysis of the data that he or she will present in a report, article or book. Conceptual tools in anthropology are diverse. This chapter will present some tools judged essential in order to deal with otherness, i.e., notions that may be useful in any situation where

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Table 1 Biological and sociocultural anthropologists

Biological anthropologists seek to understand how humans adapt to diverse environments; how biological and cultural processes work together to shape growth, development and behaviour; and what causes disease and early death. In addition, they are interested in human biological origins, evolution and variation. They give primary attention to investigating questions having to do with evolutionary theory, our place in nature, adaptation and human biological variation. To understand these processes, biological anthropologists study other primates (primatology), the fossil record (palaeoanthropology), prehistoric people (bioarchaeology) and the biology (e.g., health, cognition, hormones, growth and development) and genetics of living populations.	**Sociocultural anthropologists** examine social patterns and practices across cultures, with a special interest in how people live in particular places and how they organise, govern and create meaning. A hallmark of sociocultural anthropology is its concern with similarities and differences, both within and among societies, and its attention to race, sexuality, class, gender and nationality. Research in sociocultural anthropology is distinguished by its emphasis on participant observation, which involves placing oneself in the research context for extended periods of time to gain a first-hand sense of how local knowledge is put to work in grappling with practical problems of everyday life and with basic philosophical problems of knowledge, truth, power and justice. Topics of concern to sociocultural anthropologists include such areas as health, work, ecology and environment, education, agriculture and development, and social change.

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one could be faced with cultural diversity, which is often much more difficult to seize and to deal with than it may seem. We thus first examine the concept of *culture* before dealing with the distinction between an emic approach and an etic approach to culture. We lastly explore the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism.

1 Understanding Culture

1.1 Defining Culture

The term culture has different meanings. It was introduced in the field of anthropology in the last decades of the nineteenth century and became more prevalent over the course of the twentieth century. The first anthropological definition of culture was proposed in 1871 by the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917): 'Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'[1]

[1]Tylor (1871), p. 1.

A representative of cultural evolutionism, which had the objective of conceiving a history of mankind in which every society should have its place, Tylor provided a definition where culture appears as 'a neutral term that may be applied to the whole mankind and that allows to finish with a certain approach to 'primitives' that considered them as beings apart'.[2] Many other definitions followed Tylor's, two of which we explore next.

On the basis of the opposition between nature and culture, Melville Herskovits (1895–1963) wrote: 'Culture is the man-made part of the environment.'[3] The image of the garden may illustrate this point: many people like gardens because they love nature. However, does a garden solely reflect nature? Flowers, trees and earth do. On the other hand, arranging flowers and pruning hedges in a certain way, growing foreign species, pulling out certain plants because we consider them to be weeds are cultural actions that shape the nature contained in a garden.

Clifford Geertz's (1926–2006) definition of culture focuses on the meaning of cultural facts, on the symbolic dimension, that is an inherent characteristic of culture. Geertz defines culture as 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life'.[4] Culture is thus the web of significance that man has spun and to which he is suspended[5]; culture is a context that allows people to explain their actions, their thoughts, their feelings.[6] Geertz makes a clear distinction between social structure and culture. He does not disregard the study of social structure, which he defines as the 'economic, political, and social relations among individuals and groups',[7] but he considers culture, that is only the pattern of meanings embedded in symbols, to be the object of the study of anthropology.

In sum, culture provides society with a common framework of references that explains the meaning of beliefs and practices. Culture thus guides the actions of people in social life. It would be wrong, however, to assume that culture acts as a programme operating on passive human beings. Culture guides human action but does not determine it. As a matter of fact, the reasons for certain types of actions and decisions that one takes depend on culture, but other decisions and actions may be due to economic constraints, social class or political affiliation. This should never be forgotten. It is true that acquaintance with the culture of a community allows for a better understanding of community members' real lives. However, social life cannot be reduced to an explanation that only takes into account cultural references. Even though individuals, under certain circumstances, are likely to act according to their cultural references, they will, on other occasions, act as members

[2]Cuche (1996), p. 16. Translation by author.
[3]Herskovits (1948), p. 17.
[4]Geertz (1973), p. 89.
[5]*Id.*, p. 5.
[6]*Id.*, p. 14.
[7]*Id.*, p. 362.

of a social class or according to ethnic belonging, religious beliefs, political factors or economic constraints.

1.2 Universality and Specificity of Culture

According to the definitions discussed, culture is an essential attribute of the human condition, and in this sense, it is universal. Every human being, in contrast to other living beings, has a culture.[8] Culture is thus something that unifies mankind. In this sense, we refer to *culture* in singular form.

However, culture, this distinctive feature of human condition, appears in human history as a diversity of cultures. This means that whereas culture unifies humans and differentiates them from all other living beings, it also differentiates human communities from each other: although all societies explain how the world was created, why the sun rises every day, what the sense of life and of death is and so on, these explanations vary from one society to another. We thus speak of 'cultures', in the plural form.

What do differences between cultures consist of? More specifically, when do differences between two communities lead us to speak of the existence of two distinct cultures? French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss replies to this question in the following way:

> What is called a 'culture' is a fragment of humanity which, from the point of view of the research at hand and of the scale on which the latter is carried out, presents significant discontinuities in relation to the rest of humanity. If our aim is to ascertain significant discontinuities between, let us say, North America and Europe, then we are dealing with two different cultures; but should we become concerned with significant discontinuities between New York and Chicago, we would be allowed to speak of these two groups as different cultural units.[9]

This implies that the term 'culture' is a concept, which must be applied according to the investigation that the researcher wishes to carry out, and that 'cultures' are not 'things' that have been predefined once and for all. Culture is thus an intellectual construct developed by the researcher on the basis of behaviour that he or she observes and of meanings that individuals express in a given community. Culture is thus a construct corresponding to an observed reality.

[8]However, this idea should be reviewed on account of recent research concerning cultural behaviour of animal communities.

[9]Lévi-Strauss (1963), p. 295.

1.3 Permanence and Dynamics of Culture

Transmissibility is a key feature of culture, meaning it is passed on from one generation to the next. Parents instil in their children what their own group considers to be *good* behaviour, *correct* practices and those values the children *should* make their own. Individuals are thus shaped by the culture of their own group from the very first years of their life, and without being aware of it, they learn to perceive these behaviours, practices and values as evidence of their very humanity—i.e., as natural facts—instead of perceiving them as what they really are, a way of thinking and acting that has been conditioned by their community—i.e., as cultural facts. This is why we can say that transmission of culture is a social process that is intimately associated to a process of naturalisation of culture.

Transmissibility implies reproduction of culture: general practices, thoughts and feelings of a community are those of the elders of the group and come from the distant past. However, such reproduction does not suppose that the cultural features of a society remain forever the same as the transmission of tradition is always accompanied by a certain degree of change. This is because culture is dynamic, although the pace of change varies from one community to another. Alongside norms and practices that are maintained, others are modified more or less significantly or even disappear, while some innovations find their place within this whole we refer to as culture.

It is thus essential to take into account the two dimensions that characterise culture: permanence and change. In fact, culture clearly shows the aspect of permanence over the passage of time, while change is reflected by its reproduction. For example, despite considerable differences, seventeenth century and present French culture demonstrate a continuity, which makes French culture recognizable; however, these observable differences between the cultural framework of two periods, separated by a long and eventful history, also explain the fact that a Frenchman of the twenty-first century cannot identify anymore with many attitudes and values that characterised seventeenth century French culture.

2 The ‘Emic’ and ‘Etic’ Approaches to Culture

References to the ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ approaches to culture are numerous in anthropological literature. These terms were coined by the American linguist Kenneth Pike (1912–2000) in an attempt to transpose conceptual tools of linguistics into the study of culture.

On the basis of the distinction between the respective aims of phonetics and phonemics, Pike created the notions of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’, by keeping just the last part of the names of these two branches of linguistics. Phonetics is the study of language as a system of material sounds, focusing on the acoustic dimension of language regardless of its speakers’ perception, and it is based on data gathered

from objective observations and measurements. Phonemics is the study of language as a system of significant sounds, or a system of phonemes; it centres on phonemic contrasts that are relevant for speakers (for example, an English speaker distinguishes 'tip' and 'dip' as different words with different meaning because 't' and 'd' are two different phonemes in English) and thus necessarily takes into account the specific features of individual languages. Each of these branches of linguistics implies a specific perspective as regards the study of sounds in language. Both approaches are complementary as well as equally necessary to this study.

It is this double perspective of linguistics that Pike, in the 1950s, proposed to extend to the study of culture.[10] Despite criticism, essentially by American anthropologists, the distinction emic/etic is still widely used in Anglophone social sciences: when considering the beliefs and practices of members of a society, researchers may adopt two different but complementary perspectives.

The emic perspective, which Pike refers to as 'internal' or 'domestic',[11] is the one that corresponds to the inner workings of society: researchers try to penetrate society by studying concepts that are meaningful for social actors and explanations that they themselves offer about their own behaviour and practices; the aim is to understand the viewpoint of members of the society under study, to see the world through their eyes.

The etic perspective, which Pike refers to as 'external' or 'alien',[12] is external to society: the researcher analyses a cultural fact by using concepts that are meaningful for him or her but not for the people directly concerned by that cultural fact; the aim is to highlight a number of factors that appear to be 'invisible' to the social

[10]In: Language in Relation to a unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior (Summer Institute of Linguistics, Glendale, California 1954, p. 8), Kenneth Pike defined the etic and the emic approaches as follows:

> There are two basic standpoints from which a human observer can describe human behavior, each of them valuable for certain specific purposes. In the one, the etic approach to the data, an author is primarily concerned with generalized statements about the data, such that he (a) classifies systematically all comparable data, of all cultures in the world, into a single system; (b) provides a set of criteria to classify any bit of such data; (c) organizes into types the elements so classified; (d) studies, identifies and describes any newly found data in reference to this system which has been created by the analyst before studying the particular culture within which the new data have been found.
>
> In contrast to the etic approach an emic one is in essence valid for only one language (or one culture) at a time – or, more specifically, for only one minimum dialect at a time or for the relatively homogeneous and integrated behavior of people of one culture area or culturally defined class of people; it is an attempt to discover and to describe the pattern of that particular language or culture in reference to the way in which the various elements of that culture are related to each other in the functioning of that particular pattern, rather than an attempt to describe them in reference to a generalized classification derived in advance of the study of that particular culture.

[11]*Id.*, p. 10.

[12]*Ibid.*

actors' eyes, allowing for general comparisons or to formulate a theory. Let us look at an example.

In many Latin American societies, which have been influenced by Spanish folk culture since colonial times (by cultural legacy or by acculturation), people recognise a folk illness called *susto* (Span. 'fright'). Beyond some general features, the specific perception of this illness varies from one society to another. Taking an emic perspective, let us first examine some elements that characterise *susto* in a mestizo society in the Chaco region of northern Argentina.[13] This illness, which in this area affects almost exclusively young children, can be caused by any strong and sudden experience of fear. According to the belief, such a shock has two consequences: first, a worm supposed to reside inside the human spine climbs to the neck of the victim, which is painful enough to cause convulsions; second, a vital quality abandons the body of the victim (our interlocutors expressed this fact in terms of loss of spirit, strength and even the name of the victim). However, the root cause of this illness lies in the fragility of the spirit (the vital quality) of children affected. Hence, the treatment administered to victims aims to fortify them against fragility: when the healer sprays holy water from his own mouth in the form of a cross on the child's face, and makes it breathe in the smoke emanating from burned rosemary, incense and myrrh, he transfuses to the child the *force of God* (contained in holy water, the cross and the elements burned), as well as part of the force of his own body (which he emits from his mouth). An herbal tea, made from plants classified as 'hot', then transmits supplementary force to the child as people in this society perceive a close link between force and *hot* elements (*hot* food and *hot* remedies that transmit heat to the body, independently of their temperature in degrees). Christian baptism is regarded as a prevention of *susto* because of the *force of God* that this practice communicates to the child.

The contrast between force and fragility is a key explanatory axis of illness and treatment in this society, but it also concerns several other spheres, including the life cycle, annual cycle, lunar cycle and gender differences. An individual's body and spirit are naturally fragile at birth and become stronger with age, over the course of the cycle of life; this explains the fact that, in this society, *susto* affects almost exclusively children. As for gender differences, women's body and spirit are naturally more fragile than men's; this explains the fact that when *susto* exceptionally affects an adult, it will be a woman.

Our example illustrates how, on the basis of an emic perspective, a society explains a cultural fact and establishes links between different domains.

In other Latin American societies, mainly adults are affected by *susto*. Such is the case in Mexico, where Arthur Rubel, Carl O'Nell and Rolando Collado have studied *susto* not to deepen its cultural meaning but to investigate its significance as regards morbidity; this required an etic approach. The researchers centred on three culturally and linguistically different groups in order to be able to draw general conclusions. The three groups were settled in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico:

[13] Sturzenegger (1999).

Zapotecs, Chinantecs and Ladinos. All groups explained *susto* as the consequence of a frightful experience that results in the loss of vital force: the *alma* (soul) among Ladinos, the *bi* (strength, voice, respiration) among Chinantecs and the *espírit* (a vital force that is distinct from the soul that departs from the body with death) among Zapotecs. As part of the treatment of *susto*, all three groups accomplish the soul-calling ritual, a widespread practice in which the healer calls the soul by the patient's name and persuades it to return.

The researchers' goal was then to see what *susto* as sickness reflected in terms of pathology. Given that symptoms recurrently invoked were loss of appetite, weight and physical strength, restlessness during sleep, apathy during waking hours, depression and introversion, as well as lack of motivation for daily work,[14] Rubel assumed, in 1964, that there was a link between *susto* and stress: in Spanish American societies, *susto* would thus be a way to respond to a stressful situation.[15] The interdisciplinary study that Rubel carried out 20 years later with O'Nell and Collado broadened the initial view by taking into consideration interactions between clinical facts and social phenomena. Surveys then focused not on the cultural explanations for *susto* but on the victims' psychological state and quality of social relationships, as well as on their physical and psychiatric health. The study showed that any link between *susto* and psychiatric disorders was invalid, but it not only confirmed the soundness of the first hypothesis but also provided evidence that individuals identifying themselves as victims of *susto* also suffered from a greater number of diseases and had a higher mortality rate than the rest of the population.[16]

In this case, the researchers adopted an etic approach: variables taken into account did not make sense within the cultural framework of studied societies but were external to it. Meaningful in a foreign medical culture, these variables proved to also be fully relevant to reach a medical *diagnosis* from the observation of individuals affected by a disorder that modern medicine does not recognise.

A similar double standpoint analysis could be applied to the study of needs among a population in the wake of a natural disaster. An NGO could make such a study based on a list of shortcomings that international organisations generally view as 'needs' and that can allow comparisons to be made between different regions and time periods. This would correspond to an etic perspective because the needs have been defined from the outside and serve, according to an internationally accepted kind of analysis, to measure the extent of a crisis, to establish the diagnosis of a situation, to make comparisons between situations. From an emic perspective, we would leave out such lists and would take the time for an in-depth investigation by making sure that people can freely express themselves on whether they feel needs and what they are. Both inquiries have necessarily different objectives—which may eventually be complementary—and they will surely result in strikingly different results. Table 2 lists the main aspects of emics and etics.

[14]Rubel (1964), p. 270.

[15]*Id.*, p. 280.

[16]Rubel et al. (1991) [1984], pp. 112–120.

Table 2 Emics and etics

Emics and Etics represent two perspectives for viewing cultural phenomena	
Emics	Etics
Emics is derived from 'phonemics'—sounds that native speakers recognise as being distinct and significant in distinguishing meaning.	Etics is derived from 'phonetics'—sounds that are distinguished by linguists but may or may not be meaningful to native speakers.
Emic knowledge represents views of thoughts and behaviour from the perspective of the participants.	Etic knowledge represents views of thoughts and behaviour from the perspective of the observer/researcher.
Emic descriptions are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by members of the culture being studied.	Etic accounts and descriptions are expressed in terms of categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers.
Emic knowledge may not be applicable for generating scientific theories.	Etic knowledge must be applicable for generating theories of cross-cultural differences and similarities.
Emic knowledge achieves the status of 'emic' by passing the test of native consensus.	Etic knowledge is obtained through direct observation or elicitation or through participants trained by the observers.
Emic descriptions describe what is culturally meaningful rather than what is theoretically significant.	Etic descriptions do not have to be meaningful or appropriate to native informants to be deemed valid.

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3 Ethnocentrism: The Belief in the Superiority of One's Own Culture

3.1 Defining Ethnocentrism

Concisely, ethnocentrism is a feeling of self-centredness that makes people regard the rest of the world through their own conceptual patterns. This term was coined by the American sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), who defined ethnocentrism as

> the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. [...] Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn.[17]

Ethnocentrism is therefore a universal attitude. Every society views itself as a centre surrounded by a boundary beyond which mankind is less accomplished than inside. Members of traditional societies often refer to themselves as 'the men', 'the

[17]Sumner (1906), p. 13.

excellent', 'the beautiful people', 'the real people', whereas they talk about neighbouring groups by using names that depreciate their human quality, denigrating, for example, their appearance or their behaviour, such as 'ground-monkeys' or 'lousy eggs'.[18] Thus, the groups we often hear of referred to as Eskimos do not use this term to refer to themselves. *Eskimo* is the name that was given to them by Algonquians, their neighbours, in whose language it means 'those who eat raw meat'. This corresponded indeed to Eskimos' eating habits, but as these habits were for Algonquians a manifestation of *barbaric* behaviour, the term is manifestly pejorative. The Eskimo, on the other hand, call themselves 'Inuit' (sing. 'Inuk'), which means 'people' or 'persons'. We can also mention the fact that the languages of traditional societies often lack a general equivalent to the term 'human being': they only have ethnic appellations for their own group and for the different groups with whom they regularly or occasionally enter into contact.

The same difficulty in conceiving the idea of the oneness of mankind through cultural diversity concerned the so-called *historic* societies. The concepts of 'barbarian' and 'savage', formerly widespread, reflect a denial of cultural diversity. The term 'barbarian' in ancient Greece and Rome referred to those who were not part of Greek or Roman culture. 'Savage', in Western tradition, has been used to declassify from 'culture' and reclassify as parts of 'nature' those societies considered to not have attained advanced levels of civilisation. A savage animal or a savage plant is an *undomesticated* one. Qualifying a society as savage is a way of asserting that it is has remained in a natural state, devoid of any culture of its own.

Anthropology was marked in its early days, in the second half of the nineteenth century, by the ethnocentric attitude that pervaded an evolutionary model. Ethnocentrism consisted in ranking societies on the basis of cultural diversity.

The theory of cultural evolution coupled cultural diversity with different stages of a social development similar to the ages of life. This theory proposed a model of graded civilisational stages defined by the degree of technological development achieved by societies. The perceived link between technological progress and achievements in other social fields, accounting for the place of Western civilisation at the top of the pyramid, betrays Western society's feeling of superiority. However, it is important to remark that, from this perspective, cultural differences simply represent the state of the art at a particular moment in time. It may change since, following the theory of cultural evolution, every people has the intellectual capabilities to reach the highest civilisational stage.

This view lies at the opposite side of a racist position, according to which the innate biological faculties of a people determine the level of its civilisational possibilities. Racism is a historically dated ideology founded on pseudo-scientific assumptions, which ranks peoples on the basis of supposed biological capacities and for which differences between populations are impossible to overcome. Ethnocentrism, in contrast, is a universal attitude derived from the feeling that one's culture is preferable to those of others.

[18]Lévi-Strauss (1952), p. 12.

3.2 Consequences of Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is not neutral as regards social relationships; it has both positive and negative implications. Its positive consequences concern the integrity of the group: firstly, ethnocentrism serves to maintain a sense of group solidarity by promoting people's pride; secondly, solidarity among individuals effectively builds up force for defending the group against external aggression or danger; finally, people's pride is a mechanism to preserve culture.

Ethnocentrism appears to be a normal sociological fact that has an essential social function as it assures cultures' continued existence, as explained by Jean-Pierre Simon:

> Ethnocentrism should be considered a fully normal fact, which makes possible, in fact, the existence of every ethnic group as such, ensures the preservation of its existence, constitutes a defence mechanism for the in-group against the outside world. In this sense, a certain degree of ethnocentrism is necessary for the survival of any ethnic group, since it appears that such a group cannot but disintegrate and vanish without the feeling widely shared by its members of the excellence and the superiority, at least in some aspect, of its language, its ways of living, feeling and thinking, its values and religion. The total loss of ethnocentrism leads to assimilation by adoption of the language, the culture, the values of a community regarded as superior.[19]

This view is fully shared by Melville J. Herskovits (1895–1963), even if it did not prevent him from becoming one of the major mentors of cultural relativism, which he theorised:

> The primary mechanism that makes for the evaluation of culture is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the point of view that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others. Flowing logically from the process of early enculturation, most individuals have this feeling about their own culture, whether they verbalize it or not. Outside the stream of Euroamerican culture, particularly among nonliterate peoples, this is taken for granted rather than phrased in any precise terms. In this form, ethnocentrism is to be viewed as a factor making for individual adjustment and social integration. For the strengthening of the ego, identification with one's own group, whose ways are implicitly accepted as best, is all-important.[20]

Ethnocentrism's negative consequences concern the relationships between different groups. Problems essentially derive from the promotion of one group over others and are likely to be a source of social conflict. These negative consequences often affect the unity of complex societies; in this sense, ethnocentrism fits together with self-belongingness. In a multicultural society, it can become a cause of fragmentation if one group strongly manifests a sense of superiority over others.

We should never forget that the intercultural encounter is an encounter between two or more ethnocentrisms, which implies a double reason for misunderstanding and disagreement. Such difficulties are all the more important when there is a strong cultural divide between the groups that come into contact. This may, in extreme

[19]Simon (1993), pp. 57–63. Translation by author.

[20]Herskovits (1948), p. 68.

cases, lead to a point where the feeling of otherness implies doubts about the human condition of the members of another group. Claude Lévi-Strauss reports an anecdote that highlights the misfortune of two blind ethnocentrisms:

> [. . .] curious situations arise in which two parties at issue present a tragic reflection of one another's attitude. In the Greater Antilles, a few years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards were sending out Commissions of investigation to discover whether or not the natives had a soul, the latter spent their time drowning white prisoners in order to ascertain, by long observation, whether or not their bodies would decompose.[21]

Ethnocentrism can have negative consequences even when accompanied by positive feelings. This is the case for those who work in development without asking themselves questions that could lead them to reconsider some of their practices. As the previous chapter describes in detail, we are accustomed to the gift of charity, to the generous gift, without the expectation of anything in return. This kind of gift is non-existent in the vast majority of traditional societies, where the motivation behind offering gifts is not generosity but the desire to initiate or seal a link with another individual. Such a gift implies reciprocity; it requires that the recipient of a gift provide a counter-gift to the donor so that a lasting link is established. Some development projects that include transfers of goods, which could be seen as gifts, fail to take this specificity into account. Such unintended ethnocentrism can lead to misunderstandings between development workers and local populations.

4 Cultural Relativism or the Equivalence of Cultures

4.1 Defining Cultural Relativism

The glory years of the theory of evolution and its theoretical model on the history of human societies were followed by a strong reaction on the part of anthropologists who, having adopted fieldwork and having therefore been in close contact with traditional societies, found that the evolutionary model was not helpful when trying to understand everyday life in these societies.

The perspective that emerged in this context, mainly based upon the experience of the American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942), was to study a society in itself, avoiding to draw comparisons or to establish hierarchies. Since each culture is unique, any culture's wealth lies in its specificity, and cultural facts should be explained not in relation to any one model but within the context of the culture itself. Boas thus promoted an attitude of respect towards cultural difference and was the first to conjure the way of thinking we refer to today as cultural relativism, even if he never used this expression. Cultural relativism was subsequently explored by his disciple Melville Herskovits, who stated:

[21] Lévi-Strauss (1952), Simon (1993), p. 12.

> Cultural relativism is in essence an approach to the question of the nature and role of values in culture. It represents a scientific, inductive attack on an age-old philosophical problem, using fresh, cross-cultural data, hitherto not available to scholars, gained from the study of the underlying value-systems of societies having the most diverse customs. The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation. Those who hold for the existence of fixed values will find materials in other societies that necessitate a reinvestigation of their assumptions. Are there absolute moral standards, or are moral standards effective only as far as they agree with the orientations of a given people at a given period of their history? We even approach the problem of the ultimate nature of reality itself.[22]

The theory of cultural relativism thus postulates the equivalence of all cultures. In other words, every culture, every world view, is as valid as any other. This does not imply denying the reality of technological progress of certain societies or even refusing the possibility of ranking cultures on the basis of certain individually considered quantifiable criteria (for example, number of working hours per day or week). For an anthropologist, adhering to cultural relativism means to recognise that it is not possible to make any intellectual or moral judgement concerning the values disclosed by a particular belief system or a particular form of social organisation as values depend on the particular society where they have been established. This produces an ethical relativism, for which

> there are no 'true' moral standards for everybody, or universal principles of duty or moral commitment. Any truth is contingent; it is part of a social, cultural and historical context. As it is unfeasible to determine absolute principles, moral judgments on the good and the evil are only possible within a given culture.[23]

4.2 Criticism of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism has been considered for several decades as a dogma that almost no anthropologist dared to challenge. However, this dogma has been gradually undermined for reasons paradoxically relating to ethics.

Anthropologists, in their desire to be respectful towards the peoples they studied, abstained from judging the relative merits of these peoples' culture as opposed to Western culture. Following decolonisation and the end of European rule, the populations of newly independent states themselves did not appear to doubt the *superiority* of some aspects of Western culture, mainly technology and accessibility to education and to health care, which led to development.

Former colonies that had just gained independence eagerly pursued development. In certain cases, such nations actually accused anthropologists of perpetuating colonial domination by putting too much emphasis on the significance of

[22]Herskovits (1955), Chapter 19, p. 353.

[23]Massé (2000), p. 15. Translation by author.

tradition, by excessively promoting outdated practices that in their view appeared as an obstacle to development. Thus, cultural relativism was challenged by the very people who were supposed to benefit from it.

Criticism from anthropologists themselves only appeared somewhat later. It is worth noting the contribution of American medical anthropologist Ruth Macklin in her book *Against Relativism*,[24] in which she posed significant objections to ethical relativism while distinguishing herself from an attitude of moral absolutism, stating that

> [t]o acknowledge the existence of universal ethical principles is not a commitment to moral absolutism. Ethical principles always require interpretation when they are applied to particular social institutions, such as a health care system or the practice of medicine. In the particulars, there is ample room to tolerate cultural diversity.[25]

She thus distinguishes cultural relativism from a flexible tolerance that we should take into account when we are confronted with cultural diversity. At the same time, she adopts, from the outset of her book, a position that objects to the unthinking acceptance of diversity, the respect of traditional practices or values just because they form part of tradition:

> What I intend to show is that some things are relative, others are not. A convincing argument against ethical relativism need not conclude that nothing is relative, only that certain types of actions and practices – chiefly, those that violate human rights – are not. Because I reject the extremist version of ethical relativism, the task before me is to construct a plausible argument by way of rebuttal. One strategy toward that end will be to distinguish between explanation and justification. It is one thing to provide an explanation of why an individual or an entire culture holds certain beliefs and acts in certain ways. It is quite another thing to provide a justification for those beliefs and actions. Another strategy is to ask whether the consequences of traditional practices provide an objective basis for making ethical judgments. If a cultural practice produces manifest suffering or produces lifelong physical disability, there are good grounds for judging that practice to be ethically wrong. A well-known example is the historical practice in China of foot-binding women.[26]

This extract from Ruth Macklin's book warrants several comments.

The ancient custom of bandaging Chinese women's feet illustrates a practice that a part of society, not subjected to it, may have esteemed to be valuable (in this case, men, for whom women with tiny feet matched a certain canon of beauty), while it caused suffering to another part (said women). Arguing today, on behalf of cultural relativism, that this custom, considered as positive in traditional Chinese culture, should have been kept would support the viewpoint of groups that dominate society at the expense of those who wish to change oppressive practices. Similar examples of traditional practices that victimise the most vulnerable segments of a society, which are, moreover, those for whom it is most difficult to make oneself heard, still

[24] Macklin (1999).
[25] *Id.*, pp. 273–274.
[26] *Id.*, p. 24.

abound in a large number of societies. They include, among many others, stoning, female genital mutilation or infanticide.

Cultural relativism argues that each culture may determine itself whether a practice or standard is right or wrong. However, the anthropologist does not observe a culture as if it were a *disembodied* abstract entity, but as it is practised and experienced in a living society. Any anthropologist quickly observes that societies are composed of groups and social categories whose viewpoints, interests and wishes are not homogeneous. A correctly realised anthropological study does not consist in highlighting the dominant norm of society, or the one that most faithfully represents tradition. Instead, it aims to listen and to transcribe the voice of every social group and category, to make apparent the complexity of divisions and of solidarity links, of consensus and dissension when analysing any culture.

On the one hand, not to take into account this complexity denotes a conservative position, insofar as there are neglected individuals who are likely to bring a social change, to implement the dynamics of society. Incidentally, since Western anthropologists, within their own societies, are more often than not part of sectors that support change against tradition, promoting the opposite attitude in a society different from their own is surprising, to say the least.

On the other hand, unhinged cultural relativism reveals an attitude of contempt towards those who are caught in disadvantaged positions on account of traditional norms and practices. For instance, the promotion of traditional medicines is today fairly frequent in many indigenous societies. Encouraging such promotion on account of respect for these societies' traditional knowledge, advocating traditional care, may appear in this context a mere front for an attitude of disdain towards indigenous life, especially considering that health indicators clearly highlight the epidemiological gap between societies with and without access to modern medicine.

The strategy of distinguishing between explanation and justification enables us to avoid the problematic consequences of cultural relativism. A situation is explained on the basis of an observation; it is justified on the basis of standards that differentiate the acceptable from the unacceptable. Ruth Macklin stresses and clarifies this distinction precisely because cultural relativism, for which cultural norms and practices find their justification in culture, left it aside, giving rise to ambiguity on what it really means to say that a standard or a value is relative.

Observing different societies, we realise that value systems and concepts related to what is right and wrong, good and bad, are as diverse as the societies they are a part of. One of the first lessons of anthropology is that universal values do not exist. All societies have a sense of what is right. However, whereas some may associate a rightful societal order with equality, others might prefer a hierarchical order, characterised by (legalised) inequality. Herskovits mirrored this observation when he wrote: 'The very definition of what is normal or abnormal is relative to the cultural frame of reference.'[27]

[27]Herskovits (1948), p. 354.

It is, however, one thing to state that cultural diversity is evident in all areas: in how to build houses, organise kinship systems and worship gods, as well as in the relativity of values. It is another thing—and this corresponds to the framework of cultural relativism—to affirm the equivalence of value systems, which could lead to the justification of extreme behaviour, for example, of a father killing his daughter, seemingly in line with the standards of his culture, if he considers her to have sullied the family honour. In other words, the mere fact of noticing, and of stating, that values are relative does not mean that someone is an adherent to cultural relativism. That someone would become an adherent only if he or she considers that any action is justified, which can be explained according to the traditions of the person performing it.

4.3 The Anthropologist's Attitude

Relativism was born from a concern for equality and from a purpose of respect and neutrality but is not indeed ideologically neutral. An attitude of relativism may even account for the tolerance of situations that neglect the observance of human rights.

In this respect, Ruth Macklin wonders what the limits of tolerance should be. Why should we, in relation to other societies, tolerate and advocate tolerance of situations that we would find intolerable in our own? Tolerance often comes at a cost: the protection of traditional culture may imply the acceptance of degrading practices and conditions, and those who pay this price are, in general, individuals who belong to the most vulnerable sectors of those societies whose cultures supposedly need to be safeguarded. Therefore, only a flexible and limited conception of tolerance seems tenable.

The position accorded to cultural relativism and the limits of tolerance should be evaluated in each context as the situations concerning traditional practices and values are extremely complex and diverse. Such an evaluation should take into account several points.

First, it is important to keep in mind that assuming the equivalence of values and morality systems may lead us to mask the relationship of forces between those who suffer on account of tradition and those who benefit from it.

Second, the appeal of cultural relativism often lies in the idea that it expresses and supports attitudes of open-mindedness, whereas rejection of cultural relativism is thought to reveal dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. However, a position of cultural relativism may, in fact, lead us to justify those who are authoritarian and dogmatic in their own society.

Third, it seems necessary to distinguish between the respect of cultural differences and the mechanical consent of practices for which the sole justification is to exist and to be part of tradition. A naive and unthinking relativism is just an easy way out, but it is not the kind of response that complex situations require.

5 Conclusion

Anthropology as a discipline was born in the second half of the nineteenth century, when early scientific works dealing with cultures, then regarded as 'exotic', reflected an idea that dates from the distant past. It stated that people belonging to different cultures are in fact different. Anthropology was then led by the evolutionary stream for which mankind was a whole, but which at the same time explained the history of mankind through the filter of ethnocentrism and regarded Western civilisation as being superior to all others. Throughout the twentieth century, anthropology has followed on its path, hand in hand with a movement of thought that gradually led it to see in a member of another culture not someone different but someone equal: anthropology, born of an interest in difference, has thus become a discipline concerned with diversity. Ethnocentrism has been criticised, although its positive aspects have been outlined at the same time. Cultural relativism has for a long time also been strongly advocated for as an unquestionable truth by anthropologists because it supports equality. More recently, this *unquestionable* truth has been challenged as cultural traditions often oppress individuals subjected to them, undermining their human rights.

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