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## **Global citizenship and the challenge from cultural relativism<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Do human beings live in a shared world or in several? The traditional answer from social and cultural anthropology has been that although the physical world is uniform, the world *as it is perceived by humans* is fundamentally and irreducibly diverse, since human worlds are culturally constructed and cultures are unique and particular in character.

As a result of this perspective, there has always been a tense relationship between anthropology and universalist claims, as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. This chapter charts the dialogue and tension between the cultural relativism of classic anthropology and human rights universalism, but the main focus is on the consequences of globalisation for anthropological thinking about diversity and human universals. It is argued that as a direct result of the increased interconnectedness of human societies, classic cultural relativism has become both epistemologically obsolete and normatively objectionable. Although the moral worlds inhabited by humans are still diverse, they are now connected in ways which have implications for the ethics of anthropological research. By discussing a handful of examples, the analytical and moral dilemmas are exposed, and the contrast with mid-20th century anthropology, when the world was still widely seen as ‘an archipelago of cultures’, is made abundantly clear.

**Keywords:** anthropology – universalism; anthropology and globalisation; anthropology – human rights.

### **Introduction**

Do human beings live in a shared world or in several? The traditional answer from social and cultural anthropology has been that although the physical world is uniform, the world *as it is perceived by humans* is fundamentally and

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irreducibly diverse, since human worlds are culturally constructed and cultures are unique and particular in character.

The relationship between universal aspects of humanity and the locally specific has been pondered and studied for centuries, but it has become acute and urgent in the contemporary world, where people (not to say peoples) are brought into contact with each other fast, unpredictably and in unprecedented ways. An honourable intellectual position in the post-war world, when discussing ‘culture contact’, was that of cultural relativism, the principle that cultures should be allowed to define their own values. Claims to universality were criticised as forms of cultural, usually Western, imperialism. In recent years, cultural relativism has become more difficult to defend, and in this chapter, I discuss why this has happened and what the consequences may be for the incipient global dialogue on morality and human values.<sup>2</sup>

### A short genealogy of cultural relativism

Never an uncontroversial perspective on the human existence, not least since it entails an implicit cultural critique, cultural relativism has a history which extends at least back to the German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and the Romantic movement, and if one so wishes, it can be traced to the Sophists in ancient Greece. Arguing against the enlightenment philosophy of the likes of Voltaire, Herder argued that each people (*Volk*) had its own ways of realising happiness and its own, unique vision of the world. Unlike later romantic theorists, Herder did not emphasise race as a determining factor, but gave the pride of place to language and place.

Often mentioned as a major originator of the modern concept of culture, Herder can credibly be seen as the father of both nationalism and cultural relativism, as both – one an ideology, the other a research methodology – draw on the same concept of culture as a totality of shared meaning common to a delineated, usually named population. Culture thus appears in practice as a series of bounded *cultures*, each of them unique and equipped with its own norms, conventions, values and morality.

With the growth of modern cultural anthropology a century later, a concept of culture which had grown out of the Herderian one was put to work. Franz Boas (1858–1942), the leading figure in American cultural anthropology for four decades, was a German émigré trained in the Humboldtian academic tradition, where he was introduced to the Herderian concept of culture. It is only

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<sup>2</sup> The recent debate about perspectivism and ‘ontology’ in anthropology, while it is indirectly relevant for the present discussion, will not be dealt with here. See Viveiros de Castro (2004) for a programmatic statement.

a slight exaggeration to state that American cultural anthropology was founded by exiles, many of them Jewish, as a German *Geisteswissenschaft*, in the early 20th century (see Eriksen and Nielsen 2013 for the details).

The notion that humans lived in radically different cultural worlds was soon taken for granted in early 20th century anthropology. Although there was a broad consensus that human beings had much in common (the psychic unity of humanity was a necessary condition for comparison), it was also widely agreed that cultures were deeply different. Just how different they were was another question. Some, like the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, held – at least for a while – that the primitive mind was ‘pre-logical’ and failed to meet the requirements for scientific, rational thinking. The majority of scholars nevertheless held that the form of reasoning was fairly uniform throughout humanity, although their different circumstances meant that they thought about different things – but in similar or comparable ways.

### The critique of universalism

Concerning universal rights thinking with a bearing on human morality, it stands to reason that mid-century anthropologists would be hesitant in embracing such universalisms. Since human rights had evidently developed, from Locke onwards, in a particular cultural tradition, namely in the complex bourgeois societies of the west, there was no reason to assume their validity elsewhere. Anthropology was never completely relativistic in its morality. During the Second World War, several fought on the Allied side, many were killed by the Nazi regime for being Jews or Communists, and some were wholehearted supporters of the Third Reich. At the same time, few – especially in the US – were particularly enthusiastic about the claims of universality for Western values. Many indeed felt that Westerners not only had lessons to teach others, but also lessons to learn from them.

When the draft Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ready in 1946, thus, the American Anthropological Association requested a copy for its critical perusal, and duly submitted a lengthy commentary, penned by Boas’ student Melville Herskovits. The AAA sharply criticised the declaration for being ethnocentric and for not taking into account the many ways in which the good and just life can be achieved. The apparent universalism represented in the hearing was, in their view, little more than a Western provincialism in disguise (see Goodale 2009 for details).

It sounded almost like a rerun of Herder’s critique of Voltaire. The objections from the AAA were registered, but had little consequence for the final declaration, which was in fact composed by a panel representing most corners of the planet, including Communist and Third World countries.

In the post-war decades, the interest in human rights and universal values among anthropologists was minimal. Although universalist theories about human cognition and the logic of action were fashionable for a while, the notion that humans somehow had, or should have, a common set of moral norms protecting the right of the individual, was seen by most anthropologists as fanciful, imperialistic and unrealistic. The founder of a strong universalistic programme (structuralism), Claude Lévi-Strauss, nonetheless stated in 1948, in no uncertain terms, that the idea of universal human rights was meaningless outside the West (Pace 1986). This view was uncontroversial, indeed mainstream, among social and cultural anthropologists for decades.

### Ambivalent engagement

This partly hostile, partly indifferent situation would change, and anthropologists would later begin to engage – albeit not without a certain ambivalence – with human rights and the bids for a universal morality towards the end of the 20th century. One of the first serious anthropological explorations of human rights issues was Alison Dundes Renteln's short monograph *International Human Rights* (1989). The title is slightly misleading, and the first word could well have been 'cross-cultural' since that is what the book is about. Using material from a very large database known as the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) as well as a string of ethnographic studies, Renteln asks to what extent it might be possible, on empirical grounds, to identify a shared set of moral principles common to humanity. The book argues that on the basis of existing cultural variation, such a set of common values is impossible to establish. Only in a few societies, she writes, does one have a concept covering an abstract 'humanity'. The only shared moral principle she discovers is *lex talionis*, the principle of proportionality, which states that sanctions should be proportional to the gravity of the transgression. Since transgressions are culturally defined, this conclusion amounts to stating the obvious, to put it mildly.

Renteln's findings were far from controversial or unexpected within the anthropological community. After all, one of the liveliest debates in the 1980s had concerned *the concept of the person* (Carrithers et al. 1985, Strathern 1992). The topic may sound a lofty and academic one, interesting in the seminar room but worthless outside it, but universal rights presuppose a particular view of the person as an individual endowed with dignity and the right to autonomy, so the debate has relevance beyond mere academia. For example, anthropologists sometimes distinguished between the *sociocentric* person, who places the community before the individual (the person has few rights and many duties), and the *egocentric* person, whose universe is centred on him– or herself (with few

duties and wide-ranging rights). Having shown that even the entities supposedly endowed with particular rights vary, that is persons, and defending claims to universality seemed to become very difficult indeed.

At the same time, not all anthropologists were equally committed to cultural relativism. Some saw it as an obstacle to the liberation of oppressed peoples, and fashioned an anthropology, sometimes Marxist but sometimes not, emphasising that historical change and the increased integration of peoples into the global world system created an incipient common moral space within which conversations about personhood, morality and politics would become possible (see, for example, Wolf 1982, Worsley 1984).

### Globalisation and the shrinking of the moral space

It was only after the end of the Cold War that the shift towards a more positive engagement with human rights became noticeable, however. Most anthropologists were, almost by instinct, reluctant to take a moral position. Their job was, after all, not that of the moral philosopher. The task of the anthropologist consisted in making sense of other people's worlds, not to give marks to them on a scale devised in the anthropologist's own society. Yet, at the same time, the world now shrank noticeably in ways which would become immediately relevant for the debate about humans, rights and human rights within anthropology – and which would raise serious problems for the cultural relativist tradition.

Actually, cultural relativism had been questioned from within earlier, but not so much because of qualms regarding relativism, but due to issues to do with the concept of culture on which it relied. Since culture is neither homogeneous, stable nor bounded, it was argued (Hannerz 1992, Appadurai 1996), talking about cultures as if they were natural species did not make much sense. The diversity within any cultural group was staggering, and boundaries were fuzzy.

A main cause for this critical engagement with the concept of culture was nevertheless the intensified interconnectedness of the post-cold war world. Tribal peoples were by now rapidly becoming a relic. The last Australian aborigines to have lived in a fully traditional way had been brought into the modern world during a drought in 1977, although – of course – many have retained important elements of their tradition. Indigenous groups became accustomed to money, traditional peasants' children began to go to school, Indian villagers learnt about their human rights, and Chinese villagers became urban industrial workers. In such a world, pretending that what anthropologists did was merely to study remote cultures, would have been disingenuous or badly informed.

The term globalisation began to be used by social scientists around 1990, coinciding with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the beginning of the end of apartheid, the coming of the internet and the first truly mobile telephones (Eriksen 2014). This world, which affects and is being affected by different people (or *peoples*, if one prefers) differently and asymmetrically, rapidly began to create a semblance of a global moral community where there had formerly been none, at least from the viewpoint of anthropology. Ethnographers travelling far and wide now encountered Amazonian Indians keen to find out how they could promote their indigenous rights in international fore, Australian aborigines poring over old anthropological books in order to relearn their forgotten traditions, Indian women struggling to escape from caste and patriarchy, urban Africans speaking cynically about corrupt politicians and Pacific islanders trying to establish intellectual copyright over their cultural production in order to prevent piracy.

In such a world, the lofty gaze of the anthropological aristocrat searching for interesting dimensions of comparison comes across not only as dated, but as slightly tasteless.

What had happened – apart from the fact that native Melanesians now had money, native Africans mobile phones and native Amazonians rights claims? The significant change was that the world had, almost in its entirety, been transformed, while the anthropologists were looking the other way, into a single – if bumpy, diverse and patchy – moral space. Africans and Amazonians now demanded the spoils of modernity, including not only air-conditioning and jeans, but also the right to liberate themselves from moribund and often authoritarian cultural traditions. And who were we to deny them this right, in the name of diversity and cultural relativity?

In this increasingly interconnected world, cultural relativism could no longer be an excuse for not engaging with the victims of patriarchal violence in India, human rights lawyers in African prisons, minorities demanding not just cultural survival but fair representation in the parliament. Were one to refer to ‘African values’ in an assessment of a particular practice, the only possible follow-up question would be ‘*whose* African values’? In this world, there is friction between systems of value and morality. There can be no retreat into the rarefied world of radical cultural difference when, all of a sudden, some of the ‘radically culturally different’ ask how they can obtain wage work, so that they can begin to buy things. The suture between the old and the new can be studied by anthropologists, but it must be negotiated by those caught on the frontier, and in this world, the anthropologist, the ‘peddler of the exotic’ in Clifford Geertz’ words, cannot withdraw or claim professional immunity, since the world of the remote native is now his own.

## The problem of normativity

Anthropologists are not professionally trained to make moral judgements, and are not necessarily particularly skilled at it. In an influential article about multiculturalism and anthropology, Terence Turner points out that '*multiculturalism*, unlike anthropology, is primarily a movement for change. To the extent that it has developed a theoretical analysis, it is primarily a conceptual framework for challenging the cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group' (Turner 1993). Anthropology, by contrast, has historically been driven by curiosity, not by moral outrage. This situation cannot be sustained in the contemporary era, and it has indeed been suggested more than once that we relinquish cultural relativism in order to embrace human rights (e.g. Kearney 2005).

There are clearly some lessons to be learnt here, and I should argue that any incipient moral universalism among professionals trained not to pass moral judgement about any cultural world, is caused not by philosophical enlightenment, but enforced through actual changes in the world. Had not remote cultures already been partly integrated into the world system through labour, exchange and communication, it would have been difficult to defend the application of the same standards to them as to the Western hegemons, that is ourselves. Today, however, we cannot waste time talking about the moral equivalence of each and every culture when our informants are simultaneously being deprived of their citizenship rights.

To sum up the discussion so far: About cultural relativism, seen as an alternative not to morality but to moral universalism, it may be said that it stood for a radical humanism in the mid-20th century, a minority view towards the late 20th century, and an almost impossible position to defend in the early 21st century. Yet, at the same time, one hears few objections in the West against childraising practices among Amazonian Indians or sexual practices among Melanesians – while condemnations, often with more than a tinge of self-righteousness, abound whenever rumour spreads about religious indoctrination in Pakistan, enforced marriages in India or Islamism in London suburbs. There is, in other words, still a remnant left of the exoticising view, predominant in an earlier modernity which allowed white patches to continue to exist on the map, and which seem to permit indigenous people to be left to their own devices.

This said, it must be added that anthropologists make very poor universalists. The anthropological quest concerns human diversity, not human homogeneity. Typically, anthropological studies of human rights from recent years emphasise how rights are being interpreted, contested and implemented in very different ways in different societies (Wilson 1997, Cowan et al 2001, Goodale 2004). In spite of the seamlessness of the world, it is not yet – nor will it ever be – completely flat. It remains round and bumpy. Human beings remain unique, and cultural worlds remain different because people's experiences vary hugely, although their life-worlds now overlap, mix and are in contact with each other.

## Cosmopolitanism as an alternative

Many years ago, a philosopher friend commented, given my interest in studying globalisation from an anthropological point of view, that perhaps the incipient integration of the whole planet – this was in 1992, at the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Internet era – would lead to an empirical realisation of Hegel's *Weltgeist*, a communicative communion with ramifications across the human species, raising consciousness to a higher level of abstraction and comprehension. I meekly responded that if globalisation could lead to a continuation of Kant's reflections about cosmopolitanism, I'd be more than happy. Where Hegel saw a seamless community permeated, to varying degrees, by a uniform spirit, Kant saw the possibilities of civilized encounters across cultural boundaries which nevertheless continued to exist. The fact that there is a global dialogue over values and morality does not in itself guarantee a similar outlook at the end of the day.

Cosmopolitanism, in Kant's (and later) versions, is not a moral universalism. Rather it entails an insistence on dialogue and respect even – or perhaps especially – when differences are profound and fundamental. Cosmopolitanism represents an intermediate position between the uniformity (and conformity) of universalism and the fragmented vision of particularism, since it is, perhaps first and foremost, a method for mediating between differences. Yet, since it is based on mutual respect and recognition, a cosmopolitan dialogue may well lead to convergence or agreement. It is, briefly, a main tool for promoting human rights in societies where duties and obligations loom larger than rights in everyday life. For as every anthropologist knows, nobody likes enforced change, even if it is good for them. If one wishes to initiate change, therefore, it is necessary to begin, as a point of departure, with the values and resources already present in the society in question.

In a review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's thoughtful and influential book *Cosmopolitanism* (Appiah 2006) John Gray states that '[a]s a position in ethical theory, cosmopolitanism is distinct from relativism and universalism. It affirms the possibility of mutual understanding between adherents to different moralities but without holding out the promise of any ultimate consensus.' (Gray 2005)

In other words, fervent missionary activity is not, according to this view, compatible with cosmopolitanism, nor is an ethical position which assumes that there is but one good life. The question asked by liberals may be why they should tolerate intolerance; the answer is that they are not asked to do so. They are only asked to coexist with, and collaborate with, and discuss with, people of different persuasions when the need arises. Most conflicts involving immigrants in Oslo, where I live, are of a practical nature: Why do the parents of immigrant

children active in sports so rarely take part in the community work – organising fleamarkets, selling hot dogs on match days and so on – which is essential to raise money for the children? Why do immigrant parents let their children play noisily outside late in the evening? Why do Norwegians never invite their immigrant neighbours for a cup of tea? It is this kind of everyday problem that creates coldness and distance between natives and newcomers – I have yet to hear of a single conflict between ethnic Norwegians and immigrants that directly involved differences in religious beliefs or ‘culture’.

Notwithstanding their merits, a main flaw in mainstream accounts of cosmopolitanism consists in their reliance on dialogue, verbal exchange, mutual cognitive understanding and so on. Where I live, we don’t really care which political party the neighbour votes for, and we don’t know if they have any religious beliefs or if they love European classical music as much as we do, nor do we care, as long as they take their turn shovelling snow in our common courtyard during the dark and cold winter months. Cosmopolitanism may degenerate into missionary liberalism, but it may also degenerate into indifference. As long as there are practical tasks at hand, which need to be handled collectively, however, this is not a danger. As long as humans across the planet, and within any diverse city, are connected through shared concerns and activities, cosmopolitanism remains an active principle. This is our world, it is an overheated, frantic and shrinking world, and anything short of a cosmopolitan outlook is bound to end in disaster in the course of this, still young, century. There can be no return to the fragmentation of cultural relativism, nor is normative universalism realistic in reality, although it may be an honourable ideal. Yet the awareness of sharing a vulnerable planet is growing, and so is the perceived need to talk, listen and interact.

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### *Građani sveta i izazov kulturnog relativizma*

Da li ljudska bića žive u deljenom svetu ili u nekolicini svetova? Tradicionalni odgovor iz društvene i kulturne antropologije bio je da, iako je fizički svet jedinstven, svet kako ga ljudi percipiraju jeste fundamentalno i nesamerljivo raznolik, budući da su ljudski svetovi kulturno konstruisani, a kulture su jedinstvene i partikularne.

Zahvaljujući takvoj perspektivi, uvek je postojala tenzija između antropologije i univerzalističkih tvrdnji, kao u slučaju Univerzalne deklaracije o ljudskim pravima iz 1948. godine. Ovaj članak skicira dijalog i tenziju između kulturnog relativizma klasične antropologije i univerzalizma ljudskih prava, ali je fokus na posledicama koje je globalizacija imala po antropološko razmišljanje o diverzitetu i ljudskim univerzalijama. Tvrdi se da je, kao direktna posledica povećane povezanosti među ljudskim društvima, klasični kulturni relativizam postao epistemološki suvišan i normativno problematičan. Iako su moralni svetovi koje ljudi nastanjuju još uvek raznoliki, oni su sada povezani na načine koji imaju implikacije za etiku antropoloških istraživanja. Kroz raspravu o nekolicini primera, razotkrivaju se analitičke i moralne dileme, a kontrast s antropologijom

iz sredine 20. veka, kada je svet još uvek naširoko posmatran kao „arhipelag kultura”, višestruko je potcrtan.

*Ključne reči:* antropologija – univerzalizam, antropologija globalizacija, antropologija – ljudska prava

*La citoyenneté globale et le défi lancé par le relativisme culturel*

Les êtres humains vivent-ils dans un monde unique ou dans plusieurs mondes? La réponse traditionnelle venant de l'anthropologie sociale et culturelle est que même si le monde physique est uniforme, le monde tel qu'il est perçu par les hommes est fondamentalement et irréductiblement divers, étant donné que les mondes humains sont culturellement construits alors que les cultures sont par essence uniques et particulières.

Comme un résultat de cette perspective, il a toujours existé un rapport tendu entre l'anthropologie et les revendications universalistes, comme c'est le cas de la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme de 1948. Cet article présente le dialogue et la tension entre le relativisme culturel de l'anthropologie classique et l'universalisme des droits de l'homme; cependant, le principal accent est mis sur les conséquences que la globalisation a produites sur la réflexion anthropologique consacrée à la diversité et aux universaux humains. On soutient que, dû à l'interconnexion croissante des sociétés humaines, le relativisme culturel classique est devenu aussi bien épistémologiquement obsolète que normativement discutable. Bien que les mondes moraux habités par des hommes continuent à différer entre eux, les connections qui de nos jours s'établissent entre eux entraînent des répercussions sur l'éthique de la recherche anthropologique. Les dilemmes analytiques et moraux sont ici exposés quelques exemples à l'appui; l'opposition par rapport à l'anthropologie du milieu du 20e siècle lorsque le monde était encore largement considéré comme un « archipel de cultures » est parfaitement mise en évidence.

*Mots clés:* anthropologie – universalisme, anthropologie et globalisation, anthropologie – droits de l'homme

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