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"Methodological Limits
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by

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METHODOLOGICAL LIMITS
TO CULTURAL RELATIVISM 1/

by

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It is still possible to encounter an anthropology student writing in a summer field study report that "one of anthropology's basic tenets" is that "all cultures are equal in that they are systems of solutions to the problems of survival in a given environment" (Sherman 1963:76). The doctrine of cultural relativism is still being taught the current academic generation of students. Yet it is patent that all known cultures have not survived (Dobyns, Ezell & Ezell 1963:139), hence, the equality of their solutions to problems of survival must be questioned. Outside the anthropological profession, a widely read "intellectual" magazine recently printed an article by an educationist who argued that because a man speaks a distinctive language, the educator dare not take it from him (Calitri 1963:46).

This provides justification enough for again discussing the methodological limits to cultural relativism (Herskovits 1948:63ff) long familiar in United States domestic Indian policy (Loram 1934:30; Fenton 1949) and now an important factor in U. S. foreign relations, even after Redfield (1953:139-165), Bidney (1953), Mead (1956:367-371), Hogbin (1957), and others such as Gregg and Williams (1948:607) in somewhat different terms have ably dealt with its logical shortcomings.

There is one circumstance under which that cultural relativism which values equally each and every cultural tradition known to man legitimately applies. This circumstance is the collection of data about societies which can be later employed in scientific comparative analysis. So far as obtaining data for analysis is concerned, as a general rule, data about any given cultural tradition are just as desirable and equally valuable as data about any other cultural tradition (assuming, of course, parity in the methods and quality of collection). Collecting data about any given society becomes, therefore, as legitimate an anthropological activity as collecting data about any other society.

Social science begins encountering methodological limitations upon the principle of cultural relativism that posits one-to-one equivalence of societies the moment comparative analysis begins. For in order to compare cultural traditions, one must define the terms of comparison.

If one is concerned with testing hypotheses about the "nature of society or culture" (Maroll & D'Andrade 1963:1053), one immediately defines a sample of societies. The data about certain societies become pertinent to this analysis. Data from other societies become not pertinent. Independently functioning societies not sharing traits acquired by diffusion from each other constitute the pertinent sample. They stand in a one-

to-one analytical relationship. Societies that do share traits acquired by diffusion assume a value of less than one for purposes of this analysis.

Keeping in mind that even the armchair analysis of cross-cultural survey techniques evaluates societies differentially, the anthropologist who ventures outside the academic halls in order to serve as a consultant in the practical affairs of community development is likely to encounter rather promptly additional limitations upon the concept of cultural relativism.

Consider the general relativistic insistence that Hogbin (1957:255) paraphrased as everyone being ethnocentric in being convinced that his society's own way of life is the best. Perhaps this dictum is true in a very loose way. Yet consider a remark by the late Rev. Solomon B. Caulker, Vice Principal of Furah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone, that he felt a "holy impatience" because "too many" of his people lived "subnormal lives" (Gruber 1961:ix). This is a counterpoised generalization that says everybody is far from convinced that his own society's way of life is the best conceivable. Here is a demand for cultural change. Many non-anthropologists believe that one of the outstanding facts of contemporary life is precisely the number of members of non-industrialized, dependent or newly independent societies who are convinced that there are better ways of life than they currently enjoy. The United States and other Western nations are committed to helping "underdeveloped" countries acquire what Staley (1961:229) terms "democratic social technology." Under such circumstances, Staley argues that while cultural relativity must be stressed because nearly endless variations in the details of solutions to the problems of development appear possible, the more fundamental agreement upon basic principles is not debatable. This argument coincides with Northrop's (1963:426) conclusion that there is

no logical necessity for distinguishing morality from scientific verification.

Even when participants in a society feel that its ways are generally the best ways, this does not mean that they will not recognize the desirability for change and even rapid change for specifically defined purposes (Mead 1956:372; Holmberg 1960:85-86,93-95; Holmberg & Dobyns 1962:109). The Rev. Caulker drew a clear distinction between populations protected by scientific medicine and Sierra Leone, in the specific function of public health in terms of the goal of human survival. "Show me how science can answer the witch doctor" (Gruber 1961:ix) he demanded, in a country where eighty per cent of infants die before reaching the age of one year, and people know not whether this is because they drink typhoid-contaminated water or someone has bewitched them.

Once goals are defined, the anthropologist is able to proceed with comparative analysis, evaluating comparative efficacy of cultural traits including beliefs and values of various societies that are functionally equivalent. This does not mean that the beliefs or values are themselves equally valuable -- exactly the opposite. Comparison in terms of a goal of controlling infant mortality, for example, requires the analyst to conclude that the mortality figures show different results for believing that infants die because they have been bewitched and for the functionally equivalent belief that infants die because they contract typhoid fever. The moment that ethnocentrism is abandoned, even if only for purposes of one specified goal, then the comparative method can be brought into play through the human mechanism Erasmus (1961:22-32) labeled "frequency interpretation."

Until goals common to two or more societies are specifically defined, true comparison remains impossible.

Such would, as a matter of fact, appear to be the effect of logically rigorous cultural relativism -- the comparative method could not be employed. Not only would the theory pressed to its logical conclusion mean that there would be no justification for applying anthropology (Hogbin 1957:254), but it would also prohibit comparison by defining functionally equivalent phenomena as inherently incomparable components of closed cultural systems.

Anthropological cultural relativists appear to forget that treating communities and tribes as independent systems for purposes of single-handed analysis by lone field investigators is nothing more than a convenient fiction. This fiction is fostered and perpetuated by field study grants that are small with relation to the man-hours required to collect data accurately from a social entity of any size at all. The fact that a cultural unit can be identified and described as an analytical entity by an anthropologist who observes it for one year does not mean that it actually is functionally independent. Over longer periods of time, the behaviors of members of small scale social systems such as anthropologists typically study are functionally interconnected with those of members of inter-related social systems in a larger scale social matrix. This assertion is supported by the number of cases of the necessity for modifying conclusions derived from synchronic analysis when a community has been restudied (c.f. Lewis 1951; Spiro 1963:ix-xix). This interconnection between even social systems whose members ordinarily view themselves as autonomous is nowhere better illustrated than in the competition between very similar societies. In such competition, generally termed warfare, certain societies endure while others with virtually identical cultural traits, customs, beliefs and values, do not (Dobyns, Ezell & Ezell 1963:144-145).

Already implied in these remarks as in Redfield's (1953:145-146), is incompatibility between the doctrine of cultural relativism and the facts of cultural change. In order to clarify this further limitation upon cultural relativism, let us consider Hall's (1959:17) sad tale of a United States "agriculturalist" whose stay as attache in a U. S. embassy in a Latin American country was an unhappy one after he protested "cooling his heels" for forty-five minutes in the outer office of a Minister with whom he had obtained an appointment. Had the attache been taught the local time system details, he could have adjusted himself to it, preached Hall (1959:18), who analyzed the incident entirely in terms of communication. Hall advocated that the U. S. diplomat consciously accommodate himself to Latin American cultural patterns. It may be said of Hall, as it has been remarked of the French in former Indo-China, that they carried to excess their respect for local social structures with historic antecedents (Soustelle 1950: 61).

There is danger that U. S. anthropologists, who are these days called upon to serve as consultants on many foreign areas for varied purposes (Heath 1963:2-4) will carry their unconscious or deliberate cultural relativism too far and mislead those whom they are supposed to advise. This is the main motivation behind the present paper -- to sound again the tocsin of alarm struck before by Redfield (1953:146-147) and others.

The treatment of time in different societies is neither static nor the only variable involved in cases such as that of Hall's attache. Latin American schools, for example, do not treat time "rather cavalierly." Classes convene "on time." Nor is the expression "Our time or your time?" - la hora americana o la hora mexicana - the neutral one Hall (1959:19) implies. Almost always in my experience, non-industrial peoples distin-

guishing "white man's time" from "Indian time" or whatever the particular comparison may be, recognize the advantages of the more technical system. In Peru, punctuality may be insured by specifying that a meeting will commence "at X o'clock sharp," expressed either as "la hora en punto" or more surely "X o'clock British time" -- la hora britanica. Jokes are directed at "Peruvian time," or la hora peruana. The claim that ethnocentrism causes everyone to hold his own cultural tradition to be the best simply is not consistent with such facts of transculturation.

The National School of Social Work in a Latin American capital city with 2,000,000 inhabitants is one that operates usually on "la hora en punto." Once each year it must hold its graduation ceremony. The Minister of Public Health and Social Welfare distributes prizes and awards diplomas. Five hundred faculty members, students, families and friends may swelter on velveted chairs for forty-five minutes awaiting the Minister's arrival a la hora latina. Latin Americans are not, of course, alone in according Ministers of State special privileges with regard to infringement upon norms of time handling expected from other individuals. Yet a perceptible difference remains between U. S. and Latin American relations between public figures and their public.

This difference arises not from mere differences in handling time, but from differing fundamental assumptions as to the innate nature of mankind which characterize Latin America and the United States. On the one hand lies a fundamental assumption of inherent equality of rights and personal worth (Holmberg, Dobyms & Vazquez 1961:39). The staff of the National School of Social Work already mentioned implements this same assumption during normal school days in order to cause the least inconvenience to the greatest number of indivi-

duals. On the other hand lies a fundamental assumption of inherent inequality and differential personal worth (Holmberg 1960:69-70). When the staff of the School of Social Work cited must function in the wider context of its national society, time comes to be handled in terms of this assumption in order to demonstrate the tremendous social distance between Cabinet Ministers and ordinary citizens (and in this case women, to boot). These are radically opposed fundamental assumptions, yet they can be objectively compared since they are functionally equivalent.

Latin American Cabinet Ministers have no "counterparts" in Hall's terms, except other Cabinet Ministers. Certainly they do not consider embassy attaches, and particularly not U. S. embassy attaches as such. Clarification of relative social rank was at stake in Hall's example. Treatment of time simply reflected fundamental differences that need to be understood since both U. S. citizens and those of Latin American nations must learn how to live together in a modern world. In order to establish mutual relations involving respect, understanding and benefit U. S. conformity to Latin values nor Latin conformity to U. S. values is required (Holmberg 1960:63), despite Hall's preaching for the U. S. attache's accomodating. Latin Americans and U. S. citizens actually handle time in much the same ways as such -- they differ in the proportion of their time they devote to least inconveniencing the greatest number, and the proportion they devote to emphasizing social distinctions.

The policy maker, if he is to make intelligent, adequately informed decisions with regard to Latin America and other foreign areas, needs to be informed accurately by the anthropologist that he has a choice. He needs to know that short-term gains may be sought by accomodating policy and/or behavior to the Latin American

or other foreign fundamental assumption of inherent inequality of human beings. He also needs to know that long-term gains in terms of modernization of Latin America's agrarian society-in-transition (or others of like nature) may require sacrifice of short-term gains in order to continue providing a clear model with specific traits for Latin Americans or others dissatisfied with their own traditions to strive toward. He needs to be alerted to the danger of short-term accommodation terminating with everyone holding the bag of antiquated social structures inadequate to cope with emerging national societies, as apparently occurred to the French in Indo-China and the Dutch in Indonesia (van der Kroef 1951:7).

Analysis of international relations in terms of cultural relativism, because this is a static principle not taking cultural change and particularly transculturation adequately into account, becomes irresponsible. It can too easily misguide non-academic policy makers who uncritically accept "scientific" findings by "expert" anthropologists, who not infrequently become "unwitting specialists-by-default" (Heath 1963:2) simply because no other person has studied the people in a given area, and not because of true scientific excellence.

NOTE

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