

"What is Culturalism? The Anatomy of a Contemporary Disease in Academia and Politics", in *Lexia. Rivista Semiotica* 5-6, 2011, 369-400

Another version appeared as pp. 103-39 in Eriksen & Stjernfelt (2011): *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism*, New York: Telos

What is Culturalism? – The Anatomy of a Contemporary Disease in Academia and Politics

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Italian title: Che cos'è il culturalismo? – Anatomia di una malattia contemporanea dell'accademia e della politica

1. The roots of culturalism in anthropology

This paper analyzes the tendency in many current academic and political debates to assume that 'cultures' exist as easily identifiable units out there. The idea presupposes that cultures are composed of individuals which share the very same set of assumptions and are involved in the very same life forms — these assumptions and life forms being completely different, on the other hand, from those of other cultures. Thus, the individuals in a culture are shaped through and through by that culture which is why they are fundamentally unable to understand other cultures. This idea comes up, for instance, in the 'hard' versions of multiculturalism where the co-existence of cultures in a society is assumed to take place without any modifications on the part of the single cultures participating. This obviously forms a left wing version of culturalism. The interesting thing is that culturalism is also growing on the right wing, in the shape of new nationalism and chauvinism. But both of these currents thrive on exactly the same culturalist notion of culture — claiming cultural rights against the Enlightenment tradition for universal, individual rights. This tacit agreement between the culturalist left and the culturalist right forms an important reason for a critical analysis of culturalism.

This paper consists of three parts. An introduction makes a brief outline of the roots of culturalism in anthropology (a more detailed investigation of this issue may be found in Eriksen and Stjernfelt 2008). A second section indicates, by way of example, the political problems inherent in culturalism: the campaign of American anthropologists against the UN declaration of Human Rights in 1947-8. And a third section investigates the single premisses, claims, and arguments in the doctrine of culturalism.

One of the major roots of this essentializing notion of culture comes out of early anthropology. During the interwar period, "culture" becomes a central concept in American anthropology in that sense of the word where you can talk about in singular: "a culture", as an autonomous object separated from other cultures — and it is a variant of this concept of culture which ends up in "multiculturalism".¹ The background for this development lies already in the foundation of American anthropology which is, to a large extent, the work of one man: Franz Boas. He founds the first American anthropology department (at Columbia University) and lays the foundations for a new tradition in anthropology, which goes against the ethnocentric tradition placing the white "race" on the top of an evolutionary tree and other "races" on lower branches of that tree.

¹ The further development from early 20th century anthropology to late 20th century anthropology and philosophical culturalism, especially in Canadian multiculturalism, is traced in Eriksen and Stjernfelt 2008.

Among the great merits of Boas counts the fact that he goes against this pseudo-scientific race concept and makes the important distinction between biological and cultural variation.² Thus, he participates in the separation of physical anthropology and cultural anthropology as distinct sub-disciplines. American anthropology is constructed by his many disciples. Anthropological cultural relativism is founded in Boas's *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), even if Boas did not explicitly develop a concept of culture; this became, to a large extent, a task for the generation of his disciples. In his philosophical family tree, the German tradition has a considerable weight: Kant and especially the founder of nationalism Johann Gottfried von Herder and his insistence on the special features and the organic character of the single nation.³ Also Wilhelm von Humboldt, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Wilhelm Wundt played a great role for Boas, which thus imprinted a heritage of German idealism and post-idealism on the whole of the first generation of American anthropologists.⁴

From Herder, Boas would import a cluster of ideas. The idea of the enormous variation of human mentality in time and space; the idea of interpreting other such mentalities by avoiding to assimilate the alien position to one's own; an ensuing emphasis on empirical field work and participant observation; the idea that language determines and delimits the possibilities of thought (cfr Boas' famous disciple Edward Sapir), and most of all Herder's *holism* — his idea that a nation is constituted by culture, a whole consisting of history, language, myth, arts, customs, all human accomplishments which may not be piecemeal understood, but only on the background of that cultural whole. From this sprang the idea of understanding rather than explaining — which was also developed by Dilthey — as well as the idea of incommensurability and incomparability between the cultures of different nations. Michael Forster argues that Boas also inherited what he calls Herder's "pluralist cosmopolitanism" — the ethical insistence on the right of single nations or single cultures to develop their individuality. It is important to realize that the anthropological concept of culture thus shares a very decisive ancestor with 19th-century nationalisms and their descendants — Herder — and to a large extent shares the nationalist conception of culture. It is well-known how Herder's cosmopolitanism was easily lost to the profit of his other principles about the organic wholeness of national cultures and the incommensurability between them, which came to form the basis of the emerging European nationalisms, both in their benign and their more malignant versions. Large parts of Herder's romantic cult around the uniqueness of the single nation were thus passed on by Boas to American anthropology, which could now apply it

² It is often argued that this development in anthropology separates biology and culture as such, but that is not correct. Human biology is, of course, decisive for the possibility for the human race, unlike most other animal species, to develop a comprehensive scope of different cultures learned ontogenetically. To that extent, the ability to form culture constitutes a decisive part of human biology. What Boas separates is cultural variation and biological variation: it is not the case that the former has its roots in racial traits in the latter. It is also important to keep this argument separate from the issue of human universals. The fact that cultural variation does not depend on biological variation is not the same as the claim that there are no universal biological features which characterize man — even if cultural relativism very often minimizes or even denies that. Finally, it is also important to keep this issue apart from the issue of cultural universals (in language, behavior, etc.) — the issue of which non-biological features may be universal across cultures.

³ In the main works of Herder's philosophy of history, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* (1774) and the large *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-91), he turns against "the superficial faith in progress of the Enlightenment" and presents the idea that historical epochs possess a closed, organic character, with each their set of beliefs and values and hence can not be judged with external measuring criteria. The same thing goes for the actors in this history: the nations. They carry their own value systems within themselves and must be judged on their own criteria, not on those of the observer. Herder thus counts as one of the founders of historicism. It is well-known how Herder politically became one of the central sources for nationalism, just like his significance for the currents in the humanities and the social sciences is crucial.

⁴ Forster 2006. Also the founding father of British anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, was influenced by Herder through his teacher Wundt.

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on nations taken in a broader sense than national states — namely the stateless peoples which became the central research object of anthropology.⁵

A decisive development of this anthropological concept of culture takes place in the book *Patterns of Culture* (1934) by the American anthropologist and Boas's disciple Ruth Benedict. The book became an instant classic, translated into many languages and printed in many circulations to this day. Its influence on the anthropological concept of culture is vast — which can be seen from checking its status in anthropological standard textbooks today. It is “one of the most widely read books in anthropology” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001, p. 62), and its special status is explicitly referred to its concept of culture: “[...] the perspective which emerged as the most crucial for its [the concept of culture] position was that of Ruth Benedict” (Barnard 2000, p. 102). Its position is emphasized by fans and opponents alike. Among the adherents count her friend Margaret Mead, in her preface to a larger version of the book: “That today the modern world is on such easy terms with the concept of culture, that the words ‘in our culture’ slip from the lips of educated men and women almost as effortlessly as do the phrases that refer to period and to place, is in very great part due to this book (1959, p. vii)”. Among the opponents counts the anthropological researcher of human universals Donald E. Brown, who characterizes Benedict's book as one of “[...] the most important and popular of all texts in cultural relativism” (Brown 1991, p. 65).

The book has served for many years as an introductory text in anthropology departments, especially in the US, but well-written and easily read as it is, it also went beyond the walls of academia and, as Mead mentions, came to influence the idea of culture among “educated men and women” more generally, in the broader public, especially among American liberals: “Her cultural relativism came to define Boasian anthropology in the eyes of the American public” (Darnell 2008, p. 44). The book was not only about academic anthropology, it had a political agenda: to spread the idea of the equal value of all cultures. There is no doubt about the fact that Benedict's concept of culture in more and less diluted and vulgarized versions plays an enormous role in the Western political and cultural public even today — also for persons and circles who have no first hand knowledge about the book and maybe even do not know it exists. The book has, in itself, created a *pattern of culture*. There is a very good reason, then, to investigate the concept of culture established by Benedict in this 20th-century classic.

The book puts forward a concept of culture with a large emphasis on the autonomy of each culture. This, of course, goes against the loose theories of earlier anthropology of a cultural evolution where different, presently living groups of people could be identified with earlier or later levels of evolution. Benedict has an acute sensibility for the possible development of such doctrines into outright racism — the book is published in 1934, the year after Nazi *Machtergreifung* — and in her first chapter she attacks ‘scientific’ racism as well as American racism against black people at the time. She admits that all cultures distinguish group members from ‘outsiders’, but attacks Western racial prejudices which continue this distinction between ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ on an alleged biological basis: “Not one item of his tribal social organization, of his language, of his local religion, is carried in his germ-cell” (Benedict 1934, p. 12).

Just like her teacher Boas, Benedict strongly argued against the idea that the behaviour of ethnic groups was determined by their biological race — and doing so, she formed an important figure in the discrediting of the idea about distinct, biological races in anthropology. The concept of race is a modern myth which is contradicted by the simple fact that everywhere human beings from one group which are born into another will unproblematically learn this new culture. It is on

⁵ The anthropology of Boas thus inherits what Thomas Hylland Eriksen calls “the Herderian archipelago vision” of culture — the idea that cultures form isolated islands in an ocean, clearly separated from one another (Eriksen 2001). It should also be kept in mind that the term “nation” around 1800 not only referred to national states but could also be used to refer to stateless people — the “Polish nation”, the “Norwegian nation”, the “Serbian nation”, etc., even if those groups did not yet form national states.

the background of this sound and actual criticism of racism that Benedict constructs her theory of culture as an alternative explanation of human diversity. Ironically, she ends up, however, with a notion of culture which is not much less totalizing, oppressive, and excluding than the concept of race — and which is even similar to the race concept on many points, maybe indeed because everything which the race concept has pretended to explain should now be explained by culture instead.

In the book, she meticulously lays out an anthropological notion of culture, exemplified in analyses of three specific cultures, that of the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, the Dobu Islanders of the Pacific, and the Pueblos of South-Western USA. The ensuing notion of culture is articulated with a decisive emphasis on:

- the mutual differences between cultures — and the impossibility of understanding any aspect of one culture as seen from another;
- the internal integration of cultures — and the impossibility of isolating and understanding single features from the organizing whole of culture.

The first of these ontological principles tends to make the anthropologist systematically blind for possible *similarities* between cultures. It is assumed in advance that all features in a given culture are absolutely different from all other cultures — even if the very same feature might appear, it will assume a completely different meaning in the context of the different whole. It is not considered whether aspects of cultures on higher levels — parts of or whole cultural patterns — might be identified across cultures. It is not considered whether lower levels, such as basic human needs or behaviors, might be identified across cultures. The second of these principles threatens to blind the anthropologist to internal cultural differences which, given Benedict's principle, are hard to conceive of in any other way than decadence, as a sign that the integrity of that culture is lacking or decaying. By the same token, this principle makes the anthropologist alien to cultural hybridization: a feature borrowed in one culture from another will then be seen as already preconceived there or as the result of "facile openness" — on such a basis cultures may never really meet. They form completely separated worlds of life which will rather decompose than communicate with other cultures, or to take another metaphor, they are like continental plates: when culture moves, the individuals willingless follow; even when earthquakes result from the clash between plates. While the former idea claims the total variability of man, the latter claims that when the process of socialization has been completed, the infinitely variable individual stiffens completely in his culture and becomes completely incapable of grasping other cultures. Culture becomes an ineradicable imprint on a blank slate containing no other determinations. With the combination of these two principles, we have one of the clearest expressions of anthropological cultural relativism.

This doctrine is summed up neatly in Benedict's most pervasive metaphor: the single culture is like an individual with its own personality; culture is "a personality writ large". It is striking that there is a sharp and unintended opposition in this metaphor: the culture as an individual. For 'hard' cultural relativism will claim that the individual is thoroughly determined by his culture — and now the radical closedness of the same culture is described by reference to the individual! In a certain sense, it is the group or society as "organic whole" that is the only relevant individual in Benedict's anthropology, which goes as far as to claim that psychological experiments show there are no "honest-dishonest persons, but honest-dishonest situations" (*ibidem*, p. 236), just like leaders, also in our society, do not possess any special properties whatsoever as compared to other persons, but are awarded the required competences by society post hoc. Thus, psychological properties on the individual level are mere surface effects, even illusions — as compared to cultural-social determinations. On the other hand, it is also culture which takes over individual-like properties such as, for instance, psychological profile. A culture may be described in psychological terms, and it may pursue specific purposes to the extent that its members acquire

one and the same set of psychological properties. This forms the basis for Benedict's appropriation of Nietzsche's concepts of Apollonian/Dionysian and the application of them on cultures. In reality, it is culture, not the individual, which has a psyche, according to Benedict. It is the whole of the cultural structure, the pattern of culture, which has individual character, impossible to split up or analyze further. This is why anthropology aims at making us understand the culturally specific which — a priori and without argument — is assumed to be radically much more comprehensive than what might be common across cultures: "As we become increasingly culture-conscious, we shall be able to isolate the tiny core that is generic in a situation and the vast accretions that are local and cultural and man-made" (*ibid.*, p. 245). The common, universal core is tiny, and the further cultural elaboration enormous — this we already know that we will once end up knowing when the culture-conscious investigation has been completed.

The last chapter of the book is about culture and the individual — even if Benedict starts out claiming that she does not recognize this opposition at all. She dismisses it as a 19th-century idea which has given rise to "[...] philosophies of freedom, political creeds of *laissez-faire*, revolutions that have unseated dynasties [...]" (*ibid.*, p. 251), events she consequently does not endorse. It sounds exactly as if she has a longing back to an era before the bourgeois revolutions. Bottom line remains that the distinction between individual and society is a dualist ideology — against which she maintains that "in reality, society and the individual are not antagonistic." (*ibid.*, p. 251)

This finally throws light upon the political implications in terms of cultural criticism which Benedict draws from cultural relativism. Here it becomes clear that her relativism by far surpasses merely methodological issues. Relativism is not limited to the sound methodological principle to remain open, as a field worker, to the ideas and life forms of other cultures, and not immediately to judge them on one's own norms. Rather, relativism is taken to establish beforehand that cultures do indeed differ in all respects. She thus takes relativism to possess an ontological status and, what is more, claims a new ethics on this ontological background. It is important to investigate this step in detail, for it contains a tension — or even a contradiction — which is inherited by many later culturalisms and multiculturalisms.

On the one hand, it is claimed that all cultures are equal and it is therefore necessary to tolerate other life forms — let us quote the conclusive credo of the book:

The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values, which need not be those of the absolutist philosophies. It challenges customary opinions and causes those who have been bred to them acute discomfort. It rouses pessimism because it throws old formulas into confusion, not because it contains anything intrinsically difficult. As soon as the new opinion is embraced as customary belief, it will be another trusted bulwark of the good life. We shall arrive then at a more realistic social faith, accepting the grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.

(*ibid.*, p. 274)

Here, we get the final expression of the doctrine of the equally valid patterns of life of all cultures — a doctrine which will protect other cultures from our prejudicial attacks and call for tolerance instead. But if tolerance is supposed to be practiced also *by* other cultures, then cultural relativism here erects a common value system for all cultures — exactly what it just claimed to be impossible. Here no restrictions are laid upon tolerance, the new value claimed by anthropological cultural relativism. It is expected to be embraced as a new creed, even a new 'social faith', and it will become the protection of good life. Not without a fight, that is, because it incites resistance and pessimism in those who must give up their old beliefs — the belief that not everything cultural is equally valid, we must assume.

The strange tension, however, lies in the fact that this whole revolution must be assumed *itself* to take place within a culture, supposedly 'Western culture'. But how can a culture, holistic as it is, thus give up some of its 'customary opinions' and substitute others for them? Would that not

disintegrate it — cfr Benedict's lament over badly integrated cultures with "facile hospitality" (*ibid.*, p. 226) towards new influences from outside? Here it becomes clear that there are not only three cultures subjected to analysis in *Patterns of Culture*, but four. The fourth one is Western culture, its American variant specifically, which does not have its own chapter in the book but to which Benedict returns pinprick-like, over and over again, during the course of the book.

Western culture is so complex and stratified that it does not yet yield to anthropological analysis, she writes — but this does not refrain her from attacking it on a long series of points all through the book. We must criticize the points in which the features of our own culture are forced, local, and overgrown, she says — she thinks of things like warfare and capitalism (*ibid.*, p. 250) and Spengler's analysis of the "Faustian" character of modernity (*ibid.*, p. 52). The latter ought to be more deeply investigated by the ethnological description of recurring types in our own culture:

It is quite as convincing to characterize our cultural type as thoroughly extrovert, running about in endless mundane activity, inventing, governing, and, as Edward Carpenter says, "endlessly catching its trains", as it is to characterize it as Faustian, with a longing for the infinite.

(ibid., pp. 54-5)

But are these claims now scientific results she has reached by the meticulous and detailed objectivity of the field worker? Is it possible at all for the anthropologist to reach such results, given the methodology defended? How may she, an individual within Western culture, break with its wholeness and attack parts of it? She, who by definition should be one with her own culture? How can you place yourself outside and compare one's own culture to others and conclude that features she does not happen to like are "overgrown" — overgrown as compared to what? — and "local" — local as measured by which universals?

Here, all talk about the "equal value" of cultures abruptly disappears, and you are reminded of the old joke that an anthropologist is a person who displays full respect for all forms of life — except for her own. Not that there are not many aspects of Western societies which are worthy of criticism — the problem is that Benedict has to break with her own methodology and ontology — the difference, homogeneity, incomparability, and equal value of cultures — to make cultural relativism into a critical doctrine.

The strange thing is that the book does, in fact, display a sensibility for the difference between the three small societies explicitly analyzed in its middle part, on the one hand, and 'Western civilization' on the other. It is by no means given that isolated cultures consisting of a few thousands of people on a limited geographical area constitute a type of scientific object which is directly comparable to the enormous current involving billions of people, several continents and considerable internal differences which we call "Western culture" — a similar argument could be made regarding "Chinese culture". "Culture" here seems to be a rubber concept which may be stretched to subsume enormous differences, from very small, limited groups to very comprehensive social entities. Despite the fact that Benedict, unlike much vulgar anthropology, realizes this, she does not stay away from entering into an ongoing criticism of the West, which — contrary to the basis of the three analyses in field work and data collection — rather has the character of loosely supported idiosyncrasies, legitimized by cultural relativism as a critical doctrine. Democracy, rule of law, science, civil, political, and human rights — principles which have arguably played a certain role during the recent centuries in the West, are not mentioned at all in her cursory description of the West where negative characteristics like capitalism, racism, war, conformism (and individualism!) play center stage.

Here a decisive and typical consequence of Benedict's cultural holism also becomes obvious: the fact that features of very different character and influence are involved side by side in the "pattern of culture". Racism and war form part of the characteristic culture of the West alongside with canned food and the fact that children want the same stockings as their playmates.

Everything, tiny or large, important or ephemeral, becomes “social values”. When the concept of culture becomes so all-encompassing as is the case here, any human choice on any level is supposed to be a cultural value and it becomes impossible (except when regarding Western culture, apparently) to distinguish what is essential and what is not, what should be criticized and what should not — because these distinctions are themselves specific evaluations taken to depend on the culture of the observer.

2. From anthropology to politics: anthropologists against the UN

It was remarkable that political forms of government in the West were not at all mentioned in Benedict’s recurring micro-analyses of Western culture. When criticism of racism was made, it took place in a generalized tone, without specific emphasis of contemporary Nazi Germany. The strong tension between anthropological cultural relativism and democracy became explicit, however, thirteen years later when another Boas disciple, Melville Herskovits, took to action. The pretext was that in 1947 the newly founded UN had begun its work upon the UN Declaration of Human Rights, to be published the following year. Herskovits, as an anthropologist, felt insulted by the universalism he saw developing in the UN, and as the chairman of the American Association of Anthropologists [AAA] he authored a protest note which he submitted on behalf of the Executive Board of that association. It was also published under the name of this committee in *American Anthropologist* [AA].⁶ Here, Herskovits and the Board wrote:

The problem faced by the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations in preparing its Declaration on the Rights of Man must be approached from two points of view. The first, in terms of which the Declaration is ordinarily conceived, concerns the respect for the personality of the individual as such, and his right to the fullest development as a member of his society. In a world order, however, respect for the cultures of differing human groups is equally important.

These are two facets of the same problem, since it is a truism that groups are composed of individuals, and human beings do not function outside the societies of which they form a part. The problem is thus to formulate a statement of human rights that will do more than just phrase respect for the individual as an individual. It must also take into full account the individual as a member of the social group of which he is a part, whose sanctioned modes of life shape his behavior, and with whose fate his own is thus inextricably bound.

(The Executive Board, AAA 1947, p. 539)

Here, we find the same basic figure of argumentation as in Benedict: the individual is inextricably bound to his culture. This time, however, this idea is turned directly against the work towards articulating universal human rights. If the individual is so inextricably bound to its society that his values can not deviate from its, then no universal right can get its razor blade in and criticize one on the part of the other. Particularly, the individual can not be protected against his society, for a conflict between the two is a priori excluded. As Benedict expressed it: “In reality, there is no opposition between the individual and society.” (p. 251). In Herskovits: “[...] the personality of the individual can develop only in terms of the culture of his society. [...] The individual even *must* necessarily support the values of his culture [...] the individual cannot be but convinced that his own way of life is the most desirable one.” (*ibidem*, p. 540).

This categorical assertion seems to hold for the anthropologists themselves only to a limited degree. Herskovits, of course, intends to protect the small cultures under pressure from colonialism and imperialism, but the ideology he constructs with this praiseworthy ambition entails a relativism which gives carte blanche to everything which may go on in these cultures. This has perhaps the reason that other cultures than the West are seen as living peacefully with each other like in a paradisiac state before the Fall of Man:

⁶ The Executive Board, apart from President Herskovits, consisted of Clyde Kluckhohn, Charles F. Vogelien, Cora Du Bois, William W. Howells, Ralph L. Beals, and W.W. Hill; Vice President was Frederick R. Eggan.

In the main, people are willing to live and let live, exhibiting a tolerance for behaviour of another group different than their own, especially where there is no conflict in the substance field. In the history of Western Europe and America, however, economic expansion, control of armaments, and an evangelical religious tradition have translated the recognition of cultural differences into a summons to action.

(*ibid.*, p. 540)⁷

The only exception from natural tolerance and mutual cultural recognition seems to be the West, which has driven man out of this anthropological Eden. On that background AAA puts forward three demands to a declaration of human rights on a sound anthropological basis:

1. The individual realizes his personality through his culture, hence respect for individual differences entails a respect for cultural differences; [...]
2. Respect for differences between cultures is validated by the scientific fact that no technique of qualitatively evaluating cultures has been discovered; [...]
3. Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture must to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole.

(*ibid.*, pp. 541-2)

The number of contradictions and problems in these proposals are almost infinite (cfr Schmidt 1955, which provides a strong and early philosophical criticism of the cultural relativist position). Is it not equally true that the individual often realizes himself against his culture? If that is the case, then respect for individuals needs not entail respect for cultures? Are there not a long array of fairly simple economical, political, health, education, and other measuring sticks which makes possible the judgment of differences between societies? If standards and values really only hold for the culture they come from, how may cultural relativism be applied to other cultures? Is it really true that all standards and values stem from cultures (and not from a variety of sources including a priori states of affairs, biology, geography, economics, history, individual choice)? And is it, in fact, correct that the origin of values determines their validity?

Herskovits' protest terminates in the well-known claim — well-known also by present-day attacks on human rights from both the political right and the left — that these rights are standards from one single culture which consequently will frustrate people living under other value systems, because they will be "[...] excluded from the freedom of full participation in the only right and proper way of life that can be known to them, the institutions, sanctions, and goals that make up the culture of their particular society" [*ibid.*, p. 543] — the individual simply *cannot* know anything else than the institutions, sanctions, and goals of his own culture. Only rarely has cultural relativism so clearly expressed the doctrine of the individual as prisoner of his culture.

It is a strange airy world, these otherwise empirical anthropologists populate here in the Year Two after the disclosure of Auschwitz, which might have opened the eyes of even the most dull

⁷ The 'cultures' of the anthropologist are most often, in these discussions, mentioned without any specification which makes the portrayal of them as tolerant pacifists easier. In the same volume of AA, however, there are anthropologists which more directly display which behaviours its cultural relativist tolerance is supposed to tolerate. Virginia Heyer writes a defense of Benedictian cultural relativism aimed against a certain Mr. Williams who had ventured the idea that marital violence must be invariably criticizable across cultures. She writes, sharply and correctly, that "Cultural relativity, in its starkest abstraction, states the relativity of the part to the whole" (*ibid.*, p. 164) Williams is now taught, on the basis of this radical holism, that "Violence in a marital situation will always be relative to the position of women in a society" (*ibid.*). Heyer herself finds that "[...] non-violence is more humane and more easily controllable than violence, but it does not follow that it would be possible or even constructive in every society. The Plains man treated his wife's adultery with expected dignity, by cutting off the fleshy part of her nose. Since Plains ethics demanded that a wife be faithful, no willingness to overlook adultery could be expected in the ordinary pattern. A meeker or more considerate response brought a man into disgrace before his tribe, dissipating the ideal in him" (*ibid.*, pp. 164-5). This is plain talk: the Plains man has his full right to amputate his wife's nose — expected dignity and all.

for the fact that there might be a tension between an individual and his society. The amount of refugees in the wake of the World War might also have made it plain that individuals are not always as “inextricably bound” to their culture as Herskovits assumes. It is remarkable, moreover, that these contemporaneous experiences with totalitarian societies have not made clear the flip side of the coin: that the idea of the individual submitting totally to his society is nothing but the wet dream of totalitarianism. Such a thing is possible only by means of a severe disciplining of individuals which requires comprehensive apparatuses of subjection — such as you might believe the 1947 public realized had ruled in the fascist parts of Europe and still ruled in its communist parts. There is only an ever so slight reference to this perspective in the protest note of the American anthropologists against human rights. In the conclusive statement of the note, they write:

Even where political systems exist that deny citizens the right of participation in their government, or seek to conquer weaker peoples, underlying cultural values may be called on to bring the peoples of such states to a realization of the consequences of the acts of their governments, and thus enforce a brake upon discrimination and conquest.

World-wide standards of freedom and justice, based on the principle that man is free only when he lives as his society defines freedom, that his rights are those he recognizes as a member of his society, must be basic.

(*ibid.*, p. 543)⁸

The first point treats the existence of political systems which do not permit citizens government participation or which aims at swallowing up weaker people. Such cultures should obviously not be fought in any direct way — the only weapon against them is the appeal to (their own) “underlying cultural values” to awaken the people of such states to face the implications of the actions of their governments.

Already at the time (Julian Steward 1948), this was read as a (powerless) attempt to address the just-vanquished fascisms. For how should the Allies have applied this principle against Nazi Germany? Carpet bombing the Third Reich with leaflets of quotes from Kant and Goethe? The naivety of the quote is scary: the only weapon against an oppressive culture is that very culture itself. And if culture is so holist, homogeneous and tensionless as organic culturalism presupposes — then there cannot exist such tensions at all. The upshot must be that if a culture is barbaric, then all its individuals are the same — and then there cannot be any “underlying” values to appeal to against dictatorship or warfare. The extremely weak way of addressing totalitarianism, tyranny, dictatorship, authoritarianism — the lack of “right to participation in government” — of course covers the fact that the majority of societies studied by anthropologists do not have democracy in our use of the word and easily might fall under the concept “undemocratical” if a more outspoken style was used.

But also the second conclusive point in the manifesto of protesting anthropologists is interesting: world-wide standards for freedom and justice are called for, dependent on the claim that man is free only when he lives just how his society defines freedom. The concentration camp inmate must realize that when slaving to death under the motto “Arbeit macht Frei” (Work makes you free), he lives according to the freedom definition of his society — and then he *is* actually free. According to the anthropologists, there exists no other freedom definition across cultures, and the initial universalism of the claim is contradicted already in the next line. Freedom was, according to another famous totalitarian doctrine of the period, the same thing as “insight in necessity” (Lenin) — just like we today often can hear Islamists supporting a concept of freedom involving full free speech, provided, of course, you say the right thing only. There are, to put it briefly, many different cultural definitions of freedom — but it is a tough thing to require that

⁸ This indirect and weak criticism of fascism was not even a part of Herskovits’s first draft, but was added after criticism from one of the Board members, W.W. Howells, who feared that “perverted humans” otherwise would be able to say that the anthropologists claim that Franco is as good as anybody else. (Washburn 1987, p. 942). The anthropological tolerance towards such perverted critics is not easily felt.

individuals living in such cultures automatically assume or ought to assume the same strange concepts of freedom as propagated by their tyrants.

Already at the time, other anthropologists discovered the problems inherent in AAA's protest against human rights. Julian Steward, also a Boasian and the founder of ecological anthropology, answered back in the journal of the Association the following year. He realized that the conclusion with the "underlying values" was a crooked and vain attempt to exempt Nazi Germany from an all-embracing tolerance, and he more clearly than Benedict and Herskovits realized the dilemma: "Either we tolerate everything, and keep hands off, or we fight intolerance and conquest — political and economic as well as military — in all their forms" (Steward 1948, p. 351). He saw that it was the very transformation of the cultural relativist method principle to moral relativism which was the core problem, and he sharply asked whether anthropologists were then assumed to accept the caste system of India, contemporary American racism, and other discriminatory systems. To him, hard culturalism must mean one of two: either that intolerance must be tolerated in the name of tolerance, or that the principle of tolerance must be intolerant towards societies which lacked Western principles of toleration. No third way was possible. To him the conclusion was that anthropologists must cease to pass value judgments and believe they could apply their science in criticism — they must remain descriptive scientists and only as private citizens draw further, political conclusions.

In the same issue of AA, another anthropologist, H.G. Barnett, expressed a strong dissent against the leadership of the Association. He regrets that the very first important public stance taken by the AAA is directly embarrassing for its scientific reputation. There is no scientific definition of human rights — and generally anthropologists should not indulge in the jump from "is" to "ought": "An intimate knowledge of a people throws no light upon their 'needs' [...]" (The Executive Board, AAA 1947, pp. 353) — except on the basis of a measuring stick which is added outside of science. He clearly saw the mixing up of facts and values in AAA's alternative human rights proposal and concluded that anthropologists must not fool themselves to believe they are able to define what is good, true, and just on the basis of their scientific knowledge of man, as the note of AAA concludes by claiming:

Only when a statement of the right of men to live in terms of their own traditions is incorporated into the proposed Declaration, then, can the next step of defining the rights and duties of human groups as regards each other be set upon the firm foundation of the present-day scientific knowledge of Man.

(*ibid.*, p. 543)

Even if many anthropologists already in the 1940's thus disagreed with culturalism and its anti-Enlightenment implications, culturalism continued to dominate many branches of anthropology for many decades to come — and during the 1960s, culturalism spread into large segments of the educated middle classes to form a piece of *versunkenes Kulturgut*. Culturalism became a tacit assumption, a premiss which could not be falsified, an automatic ideology in large parts of the Western middle classes.

3. The argument of culturalism dissected

Later, culturalism also came to influence the UN system considerably — an example being the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's two famous UNESCO papers, the former of which almost served as the birth certificate of UNESCO. The UN system thus remains split, to this day, between the universalism of the Human Rights declaration on the one hand and culturalism on the other hand. This tension within the UN thus makes understandable the success, in the UN Human Rights Commission, of the promoters of the culturalist claim for the curtailing of Free Speech by means of a protection against the so-called "defamation of religion" (a further analysis of

UNESCO's culturalism and the pressure on the UNHRC can be found in Eriksen and Stjernfelt (2008). Culturalism thus remains a very important and influential ideology, both within academia and within national and international politics. Let us analyze the details of the culturalist argument.

The philosopher P.F. Schmidt presented early, already in the 1955 paper "Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism", a clear and detailed charting of central steps and problems in the culturalist complex of arguments. He distinguishes three different claims: a fact, a hypothesis, and an ethical doctrine. The anthropological argument takes its point of departure in a *cultural relativist fact* which can be rephrased as follows:

(1) Different cultural systems of value and thought exist.

This premiss is empirically undoubtable and furnish the reality base on which Benedict & Co. may claim that cultural relativism forms a scientific theory. But from this the normative relativism in no way follows — the norm which Schmidt calls the *cultural relativist thesis*:

(2) There is no cross-cultural norm which may judge between the different standards of different cultures.

This is a meta-ethical hypothesis which in no way is entailed by (1). It might for instance be the case that cultures are different, but there still exist a set of true values or true claims which different cultures may be judged on — maybe a set of truths we have not yet investigated thoroughly. In the same way as there exist many different claims and propositions, true and false, about any certain state-of-affairs which may only subsist in one way. That cannot be the case if (2) holds. But (2) is not incompatible with what could be called empirical universalism: that the meticulous investigation of the cultures of the world might some day result in the fact that all of them share certain values or thoughts, even if (2) claims that no metatheory may exist which may confirm that these common values or thoughts are in some sense correct. But no matter whether the meta-ethical claim of (2) is in fact correct or not, it is surprising that cultural relativism very often hastens on to the normalive claim that "Tolerance is good", the *cultural relative norm*:

(3) Therefore all cultures have a right to tolerance

which, as Schmidt asserts, in no way follows from (1) and (2). In a certain sense, (3) is even in a flagrant contradiction to (2). While (2) claims that there can be no normative cross-cultural demands which are valid, (3) quickly erects exactly such a demand: tolerance. Quite on the contrary, a more probable result of the claim (2) would be the neverending battle between cultures: strife or outright warfare between ethnocentric values, exactly because no cross-cultural doctrine is possible which might settle the dispute and end the strife. As Renteln says: "If relativism is associated with any value, it is ethnocentrism and not tolerance" (1988, p. 63).

We can add that it may be for that reason that (3) is seen as necessary, that is, exactly because (3) does *not* follow from (2). (3) is taken as necessary to stop the strife which (2) makes inevitable. But for many cultural relativists, (3) primarily seems to be motivated by the more or less brutal actions by the West against various colonized populations, actions which early anthropology praiseworthy turned against. Maybe the urgent character of this appeal has blurred the principal problem for the relativists — cfr Herskovits above who seems to mean that cultures outside the detrimental sphere of influence of the West have by and large lived tolerantly in peace with each other. If you take this rosy idea as point of departure, you miss the point that (3)

maintained with equal force for all cultures potentially leads to tolerance towards intolerances of all sorts.

There are, however, more aspects of the cultural relativist doctrine than those three basic ideas listed by Schmidt.⁹ As a consequence of (1), we can place the methodological idea that

(4) If you investigate an alien culture, it must take place in a neutral way, so that the anthropologist strives for placing his own cultural assumptions in brackets.

As we have seen, (4) may motivate ethnographical (field work as participant observer) and ethnological (comparative cross-cultural studies) rules of conduct which have shown scientific validity. (4), however, entails a restriction on (2): the anthropologist is assumed to be able to bring himself in a suitable distance to his own culture so that he does not just reproduce cultural prejudices in his research. It is thus presupposed to be possible that the anthropologist may, at one and the same time, participate in the culture studied and maintain an objective distance to what he sees and participates in. But already before the next step to maintain the difference between cultures, there are important problems in the principle (4). How do you grant that the anthropologist does not blindly reproduce the culture's own biased understandings of itself and does not systematically overlook important issues which the culture studied is, in itself, organized in a way not to discover?

Another important addition to (1) says that not only do different systems of value and thought exist, but:

(5) Systems of value of thought are *infinitely* variable.

It is not entailed by the naked fact of (1) and is, as a matter of fact, a daring generalization – how could we know that? It is presented as an explicit claim in Benedict, but also implies certain dangers in the work of the anthropologist: he may easily overlook resemblances between cultures, if he from the very beginning only intends to find differences. The specificity of cultures may be exaggerated in description, and cross-cultural loans, communication, hybridization, and influence between cultures may become invisible, just like cultural, biological, or other universals may be. But (5) is also problematic for another reason: is it really correct that cultural variability is infinite? Could any possible bundle of cultural features, practices, ideas, and values be put together and be made to function as a culture? Could there exist a culture which celebrated murder as the highest value, or a culture which saw any kind of hunger as a vice? Could there exist a culture which claimed that all things fall upwards? As Barry Smith says: could there exist a culture where the acceptance of any agreement required that the two parties subjected themselves to painful surgery or proved a hitherto unproved mathematical conjecture? This is, in fact, two distinct problems: could there exist a culture with consequently counterproductive value systems? And could there exist a culture with systematical erroneous systems of facts?

As a further important thing about (1) is that we can thus see it has two variants:

(6) There are different cultural value systems

(7) There are different cultural thought systems

Naturally, they are just as unproblematically true as (1), but they do not have the same radicality, if they are taken as basis for relativism. If you take the difference as indication of that there is no

⁹ Renteln 1988 investigates more in-depth some of the aspects of relativism.

system which is more correct than another (2), then (6) gives rise to moral relativism, while (7), even more radically, gives rise to epistemological relativism (as we encounter it in Clifford Geertz). Epistemological relativism, resulting from (2) plus (7) was already developed in early American anthropology in the shape of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, presented by the two anthropological linguists, the Boas disciple Edward Sapir and his disciple Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose main idea can be expressed as follows:

(8) Linguistic distinctions determine the distinctions of thought

The categories employed by a given language are assumed to shape the thought of the individual speaking the language, so that he cannot, in fact, think counter to his language. This idea, of course, can be found in more and less radical variants. Does (8) just mean that the distinctions of language — along with other determinations — influence upon thought? Then the claim seems unproblematical. But does it mean that the distinctions of language present precise and unchangeable limits for what can be thought by an individual speaking that language, then it is far more problematic. (8) appears in further sub-variants, such as:

(9) The lexical distinctions of language determine thought

(10) The grammar of language determines thought

The former claim refers to observations like the one that different languages have different color taxonomies with larger or lesser granularity and different borderlines between the concepts, while the latter refers to the fact that different languages have different grammatical structurings of the same domain, e.g. as to the tempus forms of verbs. Here, a variant of (2) may play a role to the extent that it has been imagined that language is the *only* thing determining thought, so that color and time, respectively, should in themselves be undifferentiated continua which are arbitrarily cut up by means of language (a basic idea in American as well as European structuralism). Here, already Berlin and Kay (1969) have disproved the radical version of (9) by an empirical investigation of color terms in many languages.¹⁰ (10) taken along with (2) is more radical than (9) coupled with (2), because (10) is then taken to imply that thought categories which are not explicitly present in grammar can not be used by a speaker of that language.

Such an idea gave rise to some of Whorf's more airy ideas such as the claim that the Navajos did not have any grammatical future category and hence had a completely different time conception than us, etc. — ideas which have been, to a large extent, disproved, already because languages have a manifold of alternative ways of expressing things which they do not have grammatical categories for (English does not have a grammatical future either but goes along with an auxiliary construction with “will” and “shall” — but hardly anyone will claim that English speakers live in the present now only and have no ideas about the future). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has, however, had a huge effects, and it can still be met with today, often accompanied by the “linguistic turn” in philosophy. The idea has thus given rise to popular but incorrect cultural relativist imaginations such as that about the manifold Eskimo concepts of snow and the like — a variant of (9). If “language” in the generalization often promoted by “the

¹⁰ Berlin and Kay (1969) showed that across languages and cultures a ranking exists of the centrality of color categories (so that a language with only two color terms always have “white” and “black”, with three terms always “white”, “black”, and “red”, etc.) as well as a cross-cultural agreement of the place of focal colors in the color spectrum (pure white, pure black, pure red, etc. ...). This does not preclude, of course, that cognitive effects of linguistic categorization can be found. Thus, it has recently been shown that the Russian distinction between light blue and dark blue as two autonomous color terms makes this categorization more cognitively efficient than the languages which categorizes this distinction as subvariants of one and the same basic blue.

linguistic turn” thus may mean “cultural systems of value and thought in general”, then the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis becomes easy to reconcile with (2) in the idea that culture, as a whole, is learned like a language and is as systematic and coherent as a language. (8)-(10) are often conceived, taken separately or together, as equivalent to the idea that a language comes with a world view. This idea is highly problematic, if only for the simple reason that it is well known that several and even antagonistic world views may be articulated and struggle within one and the same language (and, a fortiori, culture). This idea leads to the widespread assumption that cultures as such imply a world view or an ideology which is shared by all its members.

This leads us to a further assumption in classic cultural relativism which was explicit in Benedict and adds to (1):

(11) Cultures are holist, organic entities, in which the meaning of each single feature can only be understood from the whole.

This follows in no way from (1) — there might easily exist different cultural systems of value and thought without forming closed, organic wholes of the type (11). The idea is presumably influenced by the fact that most of the cultures studied by early anthropology were geographically well-defined on small and separate territories, just like the cultures studied were most often rather small so that they were rarely segregated into highly visible, different, and competing subgroups. But (11) constitutes, in fact, a highly problematic addition to (1), because (11) systematically overlooks a long series of important features in cultures. They are dynamic; they interact with other cultures; they form hybrid cultures; they often display internal oppositions between different subgroups, and many of the ideas of a culture may be weapons of one subgroups fight against another; they are often fuzzy and contradictory and often have the character of a more or less loose sum of cultural parts than the powerful organic metaphor admits. (11) is thus a very important addition to (1) in order to get at the categorical articulation of meta-ethical relativism (2).

If radical holism does not hold, it might be fairly difficult to compare cultures and judge them different, because they no longer form separate wholes, especially not in mixed societies. (11) as a hypothesis entails the danger that the anthropologist comes to conceive of a culture as much more static than it is, to eternalize features which are only temporary, to exaggerate the unity of culture and overlook plurality, tensions, contradictions, and social oppositions within a culture.¹¹ Politically, it immediately entails the danger that anthropology allies itself with the most traditionalist, most reactionary, even authoritarian forces which have an interest in keeping tradition “pure” and unchallenged, in enforcing the doctrines of culture and persuade or force ill-adjusted, deviant, or rebel members of the culture to subject. This is one of the most decisive premisses of ‘hard’ cultural relativism which is presented very explicitly in Benedict but which often lives a more secluded life as an undoubted but merely implicit premiss. But how can cultures be assumed to be organic wholes? Only if they possess the power to imprint the cultural systems in all individuals in a successful socialization process, cfr Herskovits above on “enculturation”:

(12) Cultures determine their members, and the cultural systems are learned through socialization, often to a large extent without conscious access of the individuals.

¹¹ Today, this error can be found in scholars who attribute to “Islam” very categorical features, [for instance when](#) this religion is assumed to be incompatible with democracy as such [— or when](#) this religion is [thought as](#) constitutively peaceful and hence incompatible with terrorism. Both supporters and opponents may thus find weapons in the ‘organic’ concept of culture which implies the attractive economy of thought that complicated social structures with striving subgroups can be reduced to one organic entity to be supported or attacked. Both are, of course, equally problematic.

This claim is very often supplemented by the following:

(13) When an individual is culturally imprinted, he possesses as a capacity the decisive features of his culture, and they make him unable to see the world from the point of view of another culture and incapable (or only with great difficulty and bit by bit) to learn the value and thought systems of other cultures.

This determination hypothesis is often overlooked, but constitutes a very important ingredient in the overall cultural relativist packet, even, as Renteln puts it, the very core of cultural relativism.¹² Also this hypothesis has its blind spots. The anthropologist may have a hard time discovering individuals who innovate or develop their culture, individuals being hostile towards (aspects of) their culture, individuals who want to flee to be integrated into another culture. But the potentially political implications of (13) may be highly problematic. Just like racism turned biology into a destiny, thus (12) and (13) make of culture a destiny. It is these assumptions which make the individual into an apathic, spineless product of its culture which he may never escape. Seen from this point of view, dissidents, deviants, apostates, convertites, nonbelievers, culture mixers of all sorts become problems because they do not satisfy the requirements of culture. In (12) and (13), the individual becomes, in fact, imprisoned in a specific world view and is placed beyond the reach of argument. The anthropologist may not only easily overlook figures like these; if he takes his point of departure in (13) he may also easily position himself on the same side as the most conservative forces in a culture, those who want to force, punish, even expel or exterminate such figures which do not in a suitable way conform to cultural determination and “enculturation”. (13) presupposes, in turn, a very decisive and problematic assumption which is far from always made explicit, namely:

(14) Systems of value and thought originate exclusively in culture.

This often lies as a premiss for the interpretation of (1), cfr Herskovits’s note against human rights: “Standards and values are relative to the culture, they come from” (1947, p. 542). But there might easily be a manifold of systems of value and thought (1), without culture being their sole source — it even seems fairly obvious that such systems actually *do* have a manifold of sources. The values and stocks of observations, knowledge, and hypotheses about the world have many more sources than the culture of those individuals: they may stem from innate tendencies, from individual observations, experiences, and inferences, from cross-cultural economical, social, or political regularities, from a priori structures, from ideas borrowed from other cultures or other individuals. (14) is the idea which makes the concept of culture superior to all other levels of description such as biological, sociological, economical, technological, etc., and which has allowed, to a large extent, the culturalist notion of culture to expand at the expense of those other descriptions in media and academia.

Finally, there is the whole complex around relativism as a critical doctrine, such as maintained by (3). In reality, you could claim (1) and (2) along with the whole cluster of ideas from (4) to (14) without supporting tolerance at all. This would give a picture of ethnocentric, incommensurable cultures, unable to communicate and probably mostly oriented towards mutual strife and warfare.¹³ (3) is thus not added as a logical consequence of (2) but, quite on the

¹² In his defence for relativism, Herskovits (1958) underlines that its core is not the relativity of value systems, but the determinism of “enculturation”, which not only refers to values but just as well to perception and thought — thus containing both ethical and epistemological relativism.

¹³ Herskovits actually admits this in his — surprisingly weak — apology for relativism (1958) when he concludes that “[...] there is no living in terms of unilateral tolerance, and when there is the appeal to power, one cannot but translate enculturated belief into action” (*ibid.*, p. 272). Tolerance must hence hold for all parties, if not strife is inevitable.

contrary, as a proposal for a means to avoid the consequences of (2). As already mentioned, this specifically anthropological tolerance refers to cultures, not to persons. But what is more: it is far from always clear who is supposed to be the *subject* for (3): does it include (a) the anthropologist, or does it also include (b) the Western society which has sent him out? Most people will probably think (b), but does it also include (c) the different cultures studied by the anthropologist? Are they also supposed to learn from the anthropologist to behave in a more tolerant way towards each other? If that is the case, then (3) constitutes an explicit anthropological order of mission aimed at other cultures and may easily conflict with cultural relativism as a methodological principle (4).

It is important to note that (3), as a rule, says nothing about individuals — it does not constitute a demand for cultures to be tolerant towards their members. It is thus a conception of tolerance which is very far from the notion of tolerance stemming from the Enlightenment and codified in human rights where a decisive element is to constrain the powers of the state from repressing its own citizens and thus force the state to a basic tolerance of different types of behaviour in its citizens. Such a thing is by no means implied by (3) which rather points in the direction of something like the Ottoman “millet” system with its permission of certain organized religions, but no liberty for individuals. Very often, a self-critical elaboration of (3) can be found, claiming — supported by the cultural relativist fact (1) — that one ought to realize that one’s own values are culturally specific and hence give up (naive) ideas of universality which one might have entertained because knowing only one culture:

(15) You should see your own norms and ideas as specific for your culture.

Again, this self-critical manoeuvre is most often recommended by the anthropologist to the (Western) reader who is supposed to undertake the self-critical task on behalf of the West (cf the Mead quote above, praising educated men and women and their habit of saying “In our culture [...]”), but is (15) also valid for the cultures studied by the anthropologist? Should they also learn to see their own ideas as contingent, culture-dependent and one-possibility-among-many? In that case it is hard to deny that such a lecture could add to the dissolution of the culture in question which will now lose its self-evident character of matter of fact when the individuals realize the possibility of substituting other patterns of culture for their own. If the other cultures are exempt from this self-critical task, on the other hand, is it not some sort of racism where they are deemed less capable than Western self-criticisers? If all cultures are presumed to adhere to (15), and “we” are supposed to teach “them”, then it easily comes to contradict (3), and in any case to insult a radicalization of (3) with which it is often confused:

(16) Each culture has its own dignity which requires respect.

It is, in fact, a far stronger demand than (3), which is compatible with a laissez-faire stance that you should not hurt other cultures and just let them live — or protect them without critically judging their behaviour. (16) erects a requirement for recognition of cultures, because they are assumed to possess a “dignity” (Benedict) — without it being explicit what exactly this “respect” should consist in or who is supposed to practice it (all members of one culture towards all members of the other, or political, religious, or scientific representatives sent out to express respect?) A related idea is developed further in the discussion on multiculturalism by Charles Taylor and his idea of “recognition” of cultures (we shall return to that below). “Respect” is, in any case, a far more ambiguous concept than tolerance, and it may be difficult to establish what a claim like (16) exactly means or what it should entail in practice. It may already be problematic, with (3), to tolerate a whole culture where very bloody and inhuman practices regularly occur, but it seems much more difficult explicitly to be required to “respect” such things. Does respect also entail that you should, as an outsider, obey certain prescriptions which the other culture considers basic? — a question which becomes especially acute in cases where cultures are not

geographically distinct but to some extent live together. In such cases, “respect” might constitute a renunciation of parts of one’s own culture. Will it then constitute an insult of *its* “dignity”?

Cultural relativism as we find it in its classic form in American anthropology from the 40’s and onwards is far from a simple doctrine. It consists of a whole cluster of loosely connected facts, axioms, prescriptions, etc. ranging from the completely unproblematic (1) to strongly problematical and even hardly understandable ideas like (16).

It is decisive that among the different variants of actual political culturalism and multiculturalism, we very often find large clusters of assumptions directly inherited from classical cultural relativism. The insight that this doctrine is, in itself, heterogeneous and, at many points, self-refuting, indicates the dangers in inheriting its ideas without close inspection. An obvious conclusion is that most problems in multiculturalism do not stem from the “multi-” part of the word, from plurality or diversity. Rather, they stem from culturalism, from the exaggeration of cultural difference and closedness. What we need — to paraphrase Anne Phillips — is a multiculturalism without culturalism.

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