ABSTRACT The authors argue that the ideas found in the harder versions of multiculturalism have already been supported by the mid-20th century social-cultural anthropology – both in the scholarly works and in the political activism of its proponents. This form of cultural relativism, making the leap from anthropological method to ontological claims about the organic essence of cultures, is hereby named “culturalism”. By this notion the authors understand a theory of culture that includes central anthropological ideas: a culture precedes and determines individuals belonging to it; cultures have unlimited freedom to generate differences, uninhibited by any human nature; cultures form closed, organic units where all their different articulations, from gastronomy to theology, form an unbreakable whole which implies that these value systems are unique and in no way may be compared with, or judged against, other value systems. Cultural relativism formulated in the American anthropology of the 1940’s and onwards is far from being a simple doctrine. It consists of a whole cluster of loosely connected facts, axioms, propositions, ranging from the completely unproblematic, to strongly problematic and even hardly understandable ideas. All those statements have been critically scrutinized in this paper.

KEY WORDS culturalism, cultural relativism, American anthropology

APSTRAKT U ovom tekstu se brani teza da su ideje koje se javljuju u “tvrđim” verzijama multikulturalizma već bile zastupljene u sociokulturnoj antropologiji sredinom 20. veka, kako u naučnim radovima, tako i u političkom aktivizmu njegovih pristalica. Taj vid kulturnog relativizma, u kome se pravi skok od antropološkog metoda do ontoloških stavova o organskoj suštini kultura, naziva se ovde “kulturaliznom”. Pod tim pojmom autori podrazumevaju teoriju kulture koja obuhvata nekoliko ključnih antropoloških ideja: kultura prethodi pojedincima koji joj pripadaju i bitno ih određuje; kulture imaju neograničenu slobodu da prave razlike i u tome ih ne sprečava ljudska priroda; kulture čine zatvorene, organske celine, gde sva njihova različita ispoljavanja, od gastronomije do teologije, čine neraskidivu celinu tako da su ovi vrednosni sistemi jedinstveni i ni na koji način se ne mogu porediti, ili procenjivati, pomoću drugih vrednosnih sistema. Kulturni relativizam koji je

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formulisala američka antropologija počev od četrdesetih godina 20. veka pa nadalje nije jednostavno učenje: on se sastoji od niza labavo povezanih činjenica, aksioma i postavki, koje se kreću od sasvim neproblemičnih do vrlo problematičnih, čak teško razumljivih. U ovom radu su svi ti stavovi podvrgnuti kritičkom preispitivanju.

KLJUČNE REČI kulturalizam, kulturni relativizam, američka antropologija

Introduction: Origins of Culturalism

Many of the ideas we find in the harder versions of multiculturalism already lie preformed in mid-20th century anthropology – both in central and popular writings and in political activism. This cultural relativism, taking the leap from anthropological method to ontological claims about the organic essence of cultures, can be named “culturalism”. By this notion we understand a theory of culture which assumes the central anthropological ideas: that culture precedes and determines the individuals belonging to it; that cultures have unlimited freedom to generate differences, uninhibited by any human nature; and that cultures form closed, organic units where all their different articulations, from gastronomy to theology, form an unbreakable whole which implies that these value systems are unique and in no way may be compared with or judged against other value systems. It is important to realize that this culturalism is very closely related to nationalism, which it has among its ancestors three generations earlier in its ancestral tree in the history of ideas – Franz Boas, basing his anthropology on Herder’s romantic concept of the nation.

Boas himself did not, however, take the full step from cultural relativist method to culturalism – this step was made particularly in the generation of his disciples. Culturalism is, so to speak, nationalism transferred from state to society. The whole idea of combining an organic concept of culture with regimentation of individuals which so strongly incited 19th century nationalisms and made them fight for the formation of new states, the articulation of national cultures and expulsion of minorities – this whole complex was now, remarkably unchanged, applied to the largely stateless peoples that anthropologists studied. While 19th century nationalism had been allied with liberalism and had a status as an emancipation ideology turned against absolute monarchy, nobility and old, multinational empires, nationalism had, during the 20th century, matured into a primarily right wing ideology, turned against the international character of liberalism as well as socialism.

It is a strange fact that in the mid-20th century, when nationalism was supplemented by culturalism built on the very same cluster of cultural concepts and the same tradition in the history of ideas, this culturalism primarily (but not exclusively) found its place on the political left, just as nationalism had done a century earlier. This might have happened, of course, because anthropology aimed at
defending its “cultures” against the then still prevailing Western colonial empires with national bases.

Thus, from around the middle of the 20th century we bear witness to the strange constellation of a right wing culturalism in the shape of nationalism and fascism – and a left wing culturalism referring to stateless peoples, minorities and former colonies. The only difference is that the former talks about cultures, nations, and states, while the latter talks about cultures, peoples, and communities – but the underlying culturalist and anti-individualist cluster of concepts in the two is exactly the same. And their political idea of the comprehensive rights of the community vis-à-vis the individual is equally tough. This relatedness was hardly evident to anybody in 1948 – even if it is striking how hard a time Herskovits had been trying to articulate a cultural relativist position which must not, logically, lead to a tolerant acceptance of nationalist socialism – Nazism. But the reason why it was not obvious by then was of course due to the fact that most of the political left wing in the West was by then internationalist, whether in the social democrat, New Deal or communist variants. But with the seeds of culturalism sown, a culturalist germ was growing on the left which would become strong once the left eventually relativized or even totally gave up its commitment to internationalism and universalism. The result was multiculturalism.

Yet, the culturalism of Benedict (1959) and Herskovits (1958) lack the prefix “multi” – and this of course was because they, just like nationalists, unproblematically assumed a bond between people and territory. Anthropological cultures generally occupied each their own territorial site – and when they did not, the reason was Western imperialism which broke up natural habitats and destroyed the clay cups of Chief Ramon. To become “multi”, culturalism now needed just a small amendment: that more than one of these broken cups should be present at one and the same place and compete for one and the same political power.

Even if cultural relativism thus had a strong institutional position, also in the public perception of anthropology, a tension has remained within anthropology throughout this period. It always contained many different currents, and the debate on cultural relativism surfaced decade after decade, for example, on the pages of American Anthropologist. It is curious to trace the anthropological discussion about culturalism during the second half of the 20th century. What, in the generation of Benedict and Herskovits, had been avant-garde, had been the insight of a few pioneers struggling to found a novel and all-encompassing Science of Man which had faced ethnocentrism in science and imperialism outside it – all this had given way to a quite different picture. During the 1960s, cultural relativism had become popular, supported by the fancy for exotics of the ‘68 generation and its cult of “primitive” and “authentic” forms of life.
At the same time, anthropological relativism had, to a large extent, proved academically victorious and even received support from other disciplines. In the theory of science, the prevailing interpretation of Thomas Kuhn’s idea of science as based on different and mutually exclusive “paradigms” was that the paradigm was holistic and that it thoroughly determined the single scientific facts; just like a Benedictian culture determines its individuals. Gradually, as anthropology studied the dwindling number of remaining “primitive” societies, interest grew in studying the different classes, layers, and subcultures of western culture, and the new discipline of Cultural Studies appeared, based for example at the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies in the UK. Subcultures, such as working class culture, youth culture, and immigrant cultures were studied—with the assumption of the idea of subcultures as “a whole way of life” large parts of Cultural Studies developed a holist concept of cultures of a structure similar to Benedict’s. With postmodern relativism and the growing social constructivism of the 1980s, it might almost seem as though anthropology was losing the race to its own relativist offspring in other disciplines. In anthropology, a more universalist pocket of resistance – around the leading mid-century anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss – had never been eliminated, and other currents, skeptical against the radical relativity of culture also occurred during the 80s, such as the growing interest in human biology and human universals on the one hand and research on the human mind in the cognitive sciences and neurosciences on the other hand.

This scenario forms the background for yet another round in the anthropological debate over relativism, initiated by a paper of the most influential anthropologist towards the end of the 20th century, Clifford Geertz. Geertz’s idea of an “interpretative” anthropology takes field studies further, but now with the addition of a semiotic relativism. Descriptions are always already interpretations, dependent upon the language and the semiotic devices they employ – this forms a second-order relativism in the very description, which is laid on top of Benedictian relativism in the anthropological object. This gives a relativism whose radicality by far surpasses that of Boas, Benedict, and Herskovits: now science is but a specific cultural institution in a specific culture – Western culture – and it has no further claims to truth than magic, witchcraft, shamanism, and similar institutions in other cultures.

From the background of this linguistic relativism it is logical that Geertz’s attack on anti-relativism must assume the shape of a rhetorical feast. His relativist program paper “Anti-anti Relativism” (Geertz, 1984) is, as indicated by the title, no direct defense of relativism, but rather, based on the idea that an attack is the best defense; it forms a howling assault against what he sees as a growing anti-relativism. The paper and the debate around it is the history of the 1940’s, now repeated as a farce. Geertz assumes that anthropological cultural relativism has prevailed once and for all – but now he sees old arch-enemies such as rationalism (in the shape of
cognitive science) and naturalism (in the shape of human biology) creeping back on stage. His attack is a joyful affair – the two enemies are dressed up as absolutist straw men with scare quotes and capitals: they believe in “The Human Mind” and “Human Nature” as unitary, dictatorial idols, and these ghosts are drowned in a tornado of glittering metaphors – at the same time as Geertz, without further details, claims that it is incorrect he should be understood as meaning everything has equal value.

It is striking to record the difference as compared to the serious and hard-fought discussions among the anthropologists in the 1940’s – a different academic culture had developed, and ridicule of the opponent (so much for tolerance!) has acquired a far more central position than the attempt to give a coherent description of one’s own position. Geertz’s position is described in the negative only – on the one hand he spends most of the paper laughing at the new dangerous absolutes Human Mind and Human Nature – on the other hand he goes against the attacks on cultural relativism by defining himself in purely negative terms: ”... I, no nihilist, no subjectivist, and possessed, as you can see, of some strong views as to what is real and what is not, what is commendable and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not ...” (Geertz, 1984: 275)

In contrast to the old, doctrinaire - but also struggling and admirably honest – cultural relativism of Benedict and Herskovits, we now see a victorious cultural relativism which no longer has any need to make explicit and defend its position, but takes it to be sufficient to ridicule its opponents. The victories of anthropology are consequently also conceived of in the past tense: “... anthropology has played, in our day, a vanguard role. We have been the first to insist on a number of things: that the world does not divide into the pious and the superstitious; that there are sculptures in jungles and paintings in deserts; that political order is possible without centralized power and principled justice without codified rules; that the norms of reason were not fixed in Greece, the evolution of morality not consummated in England” (ibid.)

Real and dubious results are mixed up in this anthropological self-congratulation with ease, but the relativist credo remains unchanged: “Most important, we were the first to insist that we see the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding and that they look back on ours through ones of their own” (ibid.). The only proper argument present in the paper is worthy of being exposed: “The supposed conflict between Benedict’s and Herskovits’s call for tolerance and the untolerant passion with which they called for it turns out not to be the simple contradiction so many amateur logicians have held it to be, but the expression of a perception, caused by thinking a lot about Zunis and Dahomeys, that, the world being so full of a number of things, rushing to judgment is more than a mistake, it’s a crime” (Geertz, 1984: 265). But Steward’s and Barnett’s arguments against the two relativists were not that they displayed an intolerant passion. It was that their
very doctrine was ripe with contradictions. The same thing goes for Geertz’s claim. How can a “perception” result from thinking much about Zunis and Dahomeys? The results of the trains of thought of Benedict and Herskovits was a series of claims, propositions, judgments, rather than perceptions. But the reason why Geertz cannot say this is that to him the very “rushing to judgment” is already a crime – to claim something about the world is a criminal act, because the world is full of many things! It is remarkable that a scientist, even seen as leading in his field, may assert such a thing: that because there are many things in the world, it is a crime to make a judgment about it. So sloppy a condemnation of opponents is only possible in a person who feels very secure in his case: a victor proudly listing his strong allies in the war: ”the appearance of deconstructionist literary criticism, the spread of nonfoundationalist moods in metaphysics and epistemology, and the rejection of whiggery and method-ism in the history of science” (Geertz, 1984: 257).

It is evident from the text that against such an alliance the study of human cognition and nature stands no chance. So even if these opponents are dressed up as dangerous fools – this has to be done in order to get the metaphorical carnival running – the text leaves no doubt that they do not constitute any real danger and are only pathological cases of “hyper-logicism” and “hyper-adaptationism”. And Geertz’s own position is so evident that there is no reason to present, explain, or defend it.

In came, however, just as in the previous rounds, objections against Geertz’s anti-anti-relativism. Nissim-Sabat (1987) criticized details in both Herskovits’ and Geertz’s field studies which he finds are systematically blind to decisive facts, exactly because of their programmatic relativism. Herskovits describes at length the general polygamy of the Dahomeys without wondering for a second where this enormous surplus of women actually came from. It came from warfare, slave trade, and the killing of male slaves – things Herskovits is too well-mannered to investigate, Nissim-Sabat claims. In Geertz, he points to the fact that women do not appear at all in his famous Moroccan field study on Islam: here, Geertz blindly takes over the invisibility of women in Moroccan Islam to the extent that he does not register it and even reproduces it in his own presentation! Nissim-Sabat thus claims that cultural relativism is not only politically problematic, but it may also lead to a systematic blindness in science: if a certain culture is constructed around overlooking or making invisible certain aspects of its own foundation, then it is easy for the cultural relativist field worker to be so much “participant observer” that he also keeps tacit about them, maybe even does not discover at all the embarrassing facts which the culture in question remains silent about.

The principal problem behind such errors is, according to Nissim-Sabat, the cultural determinism of relativism which he compares to Geertz’s criticism of sociobiology for implying biological determinism. But is cultural determinism any
better than biological determinism? The assumption that culture has the ability to completely determine the individual appears again, forty years later, as the decisive problem in culturalism. It entails that any culture demands respect, only because it functions – that is, no matter what price this functioning has for the individuals: "What most people learn from Benedict is that every culture deserves respect because it works" (Nissim-Sabat 1987: 938).

In a certain sense, the same arguments re-circulate in the 1980s as in the 1940s. But the whole scenery around the argument has changed. The picture of the few, truth-seeking anthropologists against a vast scientific and political power structure has given way to victorious anthropologists who may enlist a whole army of allies in scientific neighbor disciplines and who do not need to use arguments against rationalists and naturalists but may let fun and ridicule do the work. The price of this victory is coolly summarized in Washburn’s looking back on the fight of the 1940s in 1987 (Washburn, 1987): it is the very idea of anthropology as a science – “The Science of Man”, “The Scientific Theory of Culture” – which was so highly prized by the first generations of American anthropologists, but which is now eroded.

Geertz gradually came to think that anthropology itself was merely a form of “writing” which said more about the writer and his own culture than it said about the culture portrayed. As a logical consequence of his radicalization of relativism to epistemological relativism, one is not only unable to judge about matters in other cultures, one is now also unable to describe them at all, because one is inevitably caught up in the language of one’s own culture. Relativism thus, in reality, devoured the very scientific ambitions of anthropology – while the critical ambitions remained, and even in a certain sense grew. This is why the anthropologist may feel certain nostalgia: “Anthropologists may long for the good old days when one could easily identify with the good guys (natives), struggling for freedom against the bad guys (the West), preventing their emergence as independent and self-regulating states. It was the attitude that underlay the AAA Executive Board’s Statement on Human Rights in 1947*. But in the intervening 40 years, the simple picture of the post-war period has dissolved into the complex picture of 1987. It has become impossible to apply the Executive Board’s policy recommendations of 1947 to the specific situations of today” (Washburn, 1987: 942).

To Washburn, the critical ambitions from the 1947 manifesto were now past – but to other anthropologists, criticism was rather what remained, now the scientifically ambitions must wither away. The strange thing in this development is

* Ovde se misli na protest koji je Izvršni odbor Američkog udruženja antropologa (American Association of Anthropologists - AAA), na čelu sa Melvilom Herskovicem, uputio UN povodom nacrta Povelje o ljudskim pravima. To saopštenje je objavljeno u časopisu American Anthropologist (AAA 1947). (Prim. ur.)
that, in the meantime, large parts of middle class public, academia and the political left wing had taken over the same cultural relativist ideas of criticism. Boas and Benedict had taken the step from cultural relativism as research method and to a normative doctrine – but they had been unambiguous as to the possibility as well as the necessity of objective empirical field study. In the spread of cultural relativism as versunkenes Kulturgut which had taken place in large parts of the Western middle class towards the end of the century, it was often only culturalism as a normative, critical doctrine that remained. Now that doctrine could almost be used as an argument for not being interested in other cultures – if we have decided beforehand that they have equal value and dignity, and if we are imprisoned in our own culture and language all the same, then there is no reason to take any interest in them, and there is no reason to believe in or investigate claims about barbaric customs and suppression in other cultures, for we have always already decided that they are respectable.³

No professional anthropologist would ever support such a claim, of course. But in a strange twist, it seems to have become the public result of the fact that of the original cultural relativism, only the worst part survived in the popular version of the middle-class audience: the automatic tolerance towards anything alien, just because it is alien. And, correlatively, the automatic criticism of every part of one’s own culture and the home of cultural relativism itself: America, and Western culture more broadly.

This boiled-down culturalism dominated the mindset in large parts of Western academia and the middle-class in the 1990’s when growing immigration put a new type of culturalism on the agenda: multiculturalism.

**The argument of Culturalism Dissected**

Before we proceed to multiculturalism, let us analyze the details of the culturalist argument.

The philosopher P.F. Schmidt presented as early as 1955, in his paper “Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism” (Schmidt, 1955), 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:

³ Cf. the idea, which for a period spread in parts of anthropology, that cannibalism had never existed and was only an ideological anthropological construction, both among neighboring tribes to the alleged cannibals, and among ethnocentric Western anthropologists.
1) Different cultural systems of value and thought exist.

This premise is empirically indubitable – and furnishes 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 is in no way entailed by (1). It might for instance be the case that cultures are different, but that there still exists a set of true values or true claims on which different cultures may be judged – 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 states-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 either: that the meticulous investigation of the cultures of the world might, someday, result in the fact that all of them share certain values or thoughts, even if (2) claims that no meta-theory 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 normative 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 flagrant contradiction to (2). Whilst (2) claims that there can be no normative cross-cultural demands which are valid, (3) quickly erects exactly such a demand: tolerance. Quite to the contrary, a more probable result of claim (2) would be the never ending 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” (Renteln 1988: 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 a necessary remedy 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 which early anthropology praiseworthily
turned against. Maybe the urgent character of this appeal has blurred the principal
problem for the relativists – cf. 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 a 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. 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 to place 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 be or bring himself a suitable distance from
his own culture so that he does not simply 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 warrant 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 that 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 from the very beginning he only
intends to find differences. The specificity of cultures may be exaggerated in

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4 Renteln (1988) investigates in more depth some of the aspects of relativism.
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 appetite 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? There are, in fact, two distinct problems here: could there exist a culture with consequently counterproductive value systems? And could there exist a culture with systematically erroneous systems of facts?

As a further important point 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 radicalism if they are taken as a basis for relativism. If we take cultural difference as an indication that there is no 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 encountered in Geertz). Epistemological relativism, resulting from (2) plus (7) had 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. If (8) just means that the distinctions of language – along with other determinations - influence thought, then the claim seems unproblematic. But if it means 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 the observations such as different languages have different color taxonomies with greater or lesser degrees of granularity and different borderlines between color concepts – while the latter refers to the fact that different languages have different grammatical structuring 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). Berlin and Kay (1969) have disproved the radical version of (9) with an empirical investigation of color terms in many languages.\(^5\) (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 cannot 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 from us – ideas which have been, to a large extent, disproved, not least 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 futurum either but gets 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 effect, and it can still be encountered today, often accompanied by the “linguistic turn” in philosophy. The idea has thus given rise to popular but incorrect cultural relativist imaginings such as that about the manifold Eskimo concepts of snow and the like – a variant of (9). If “language”

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\(^5\) 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 has “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 as one and the same basic blue.
in the generalization often promoted by “the linguistic turn” thus may mean “cultural systems of value and thought in general”, then the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis becomes easy to reconcile with (2) with 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, either 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 holistic, 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 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 as 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 subgroup’s 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 to be 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 internally in
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 submit. This is one of the most decisive premises 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 premise. But how can cultures be assumed to be organic wholes? Only if they possess the power to imprint the totality of cultural systems in all individuals in a successful socialization process (cf. Herskovits 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.

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 it constitutes a very important ingredient in the overall cultural relativist package, even, as Renteln puts it, the very core of cultural relativism. Also this hypothesis has its blind spots. The anthropologist may have a hard time discovering individuals who innovate or develop their culture, individuals being imimical 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 as racism turned biology into a destiny, thus (12) and (13) make of culture a destiny. It is these

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6 Today, this error can be found in scholars who attribute to “Islam” very categorical features such that this religion is assumed to be incompatible with democracy as such – or that this religion is 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 competing subgroups can be reduced to one organic entity to be supported or attacked. Both are, of course, equally problematic.

7 In his defense of 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.
assumptions which make the individual into an apathetic, spineless product of his culture which he may never escape. Seen from this point of view, dissidents, deviants, apostates, converts, 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 who 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 premise in the interpretation of (1), cf. Herskovits’ note against human rights: “Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive” (AAA 1947: 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 economic, social, or political regularities, from a priori structures, from ideas borrowed from other cultures or other individuals.8 (14) is the idea which makes the concept of culture superior to all other levels of description such as biological, sociological, economical, technological, for example, 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

8 A priori: when people in most cultures believe that 2+2=4, it is probably not because it is a cultural heritage, but because 2+2=4. Biological: when human beings in all culture prefer food made up of proteins, carbohydrates and fats, rather than of sand, stones, or mud, it is because of universal features of animal biology. When all human cultures have languages, this is based on specifically human biological capacities not enjoyed by our closest kin, the great apes. When all known languages have demonstratives, it is not because of culture, but because of the need of pointing out the object you are talking about. Economical: when the scarcity of a good makes its value rise while the abundance of the same good may make its value fall, it is an economical regularity which does not form an inherited value of a culture. Sociological: when two-person groups are more stable than three-person groups, this has sociological reasons which do not stem from specific cultural evaluations. And so forth.
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.9 (3) is thus not added as a logical consequence of (2) but, quite on the contrary, as a proposal for a means to avoid the consequences of (2). As already mentioned, this specifically anthropological concept of tolerance refers to cultures, not to persons. It is the culture as a whole which should be tolerated, not the individual whims of its members – particularly not if they do not fit into the cultural pattern tolerated. 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 suppressing its own citizens and thus force the state to a basic tolerance of different types of behavior from 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 religious groups, but with 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 of knowing only one culture:

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

Again, this self-critical maneuver 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 (e.g. Margaret Mead praised educated men and women and their habit of saying “In our culture ...”), but is (15) also valid for the cultures

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9 Herskovits (1958) actually admits this in his – surprisingly weak – apology for relativism 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” (1958: 272). Tolerance must hence hold for all parties, and if not strife is inevitable.
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 as a matter of course 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 in which they are deemed less capable than western self-criticizers? If all cultures are presumed to adhere to (15), and “we” are supposed to teach “them”, then it easily comes to contradict (3). In any case, (15) often contributes to 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 one should not harm other cultures and just let them live – or protect them without critically judging their behavior. (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 (1994) and his idea of “recognition” of cultures. “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? Such a question 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 to its “dignity”?

**Conclusion**

Cultural relativism as we find it in its classic formulation in American anthropology from the 1940’s 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 problematic and even hardly understandable ideas such as (16).
It is instructive 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.

References


