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Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

A Dogon informant once told ethnographer Laurence Douny, “A people without history is a world without soul” (Douny). Every culture has a history that has shaped their ways of living, from the smallest acts of daily habit to the complex system of views and beliefs. In the 19th century, the Western world became obsessed with defining cultures outside their own. Many methods of viewing other cultures came about as a result, the most significant of which are ethnocentrism and cultural relativism.

Ethnocentrism is the method of understanding other people through one’s own system of cultural values and beliefs. Inherent in this understanding is a sense of superiority. Many anthropologists and ethnographers in the early days of their field practiced ethnocentrism. It stemmed from the idea of cultural evolution. Cultural evolution took the principles of biological evolution and applied them to different cultures. The cultures that were the “fittest” were superior and more advanced, whereas the cultures that were “unfit” were inferior. Those who created the system of ranking were from Western civilizations, and of course organized the civilization so that their own cultures were superior. This justified the rampant imperialism and colonialism spreading across the globe. No one could object to subjugating other peoples to Westernization when it was made clear that a Western society was the pinnacle of humanity. As early anthropologists traveled to “exotic” places and brought back descriptions of “lawless savages”, the sense of Western superiority became second nature in many. Anthropologist

Francis L.K. Hsu puts it best when he writes, “prejudices die hard, and Western technological superiority still nurtures in many the illusion of Western racial and cultural superiority in general” (Hsu 1979). Ethnocentrism wormed its way into many ethnographies of the time, including the work of ethnographer Malinowski. Malinowski revolutionized how ethnographic observation was conducted, but even he was subject to judging the native culture through the lense of his own. He never related to the natives he was studying as friends or colleagues, and indeed seemed to nurse a dislike of them. He thought himself technologically and morally superior to people from other cultures, and it shows in his work (Hsu 1979). Hsu’s college postulates the question “Is it possible for an anthropologist who hates his natives to understand their way of doing things? Conversely, is it also possible for one who is so enamored with his natives that he merely romanticizes their ways?” (Hsu 1979). Both are possible through ethnocentrism, because both views treat the native culture as inferior. The former believes that a culture’s inferiority makes its participants slow and frustrating to interact with, while the latter believes that a culture is a commodity rather than a living organism.

Anthropologists have since become more aware of the effect their own culture has on their interpretations, to an extent. Despite their efforts, however, no one can ever experience the world with a truly neutral outlook. People will always be shaped by their upbringing, and basing judgements on one’s background is almost human nature. No matter how hard anthropologists try not to, they will almost always compare other cultures to their own. Many anthropologists argue that this may not necessarily be a bad thing. These comparisons can be used for educational purposes, or to illustrate a point that would be impossible to understand without falling back on familiar ideas. In addition, Hsu suggests that “comparisons are unsatisfactory

because “our own” part of the data is not systematically studied and is generally taken out of social and cultural contexts” (Hsu 1979). In fact, if one can account for subconscious references to personal experience, then one can hopefully remove prejudice from the equation. One way to stay away from ethnocentrism is to study one’s own culture. Ethnocentrism does not remain in the past, either. In recent politics, ethnocentrism has infiltrated the ways politicians write international law and how world leaders handle international affairs. Recently, The United States of America has fallen prey to this mode of thinking, considering cultures and people who do not fall into white American ideals as inferior. However, Hsu and other anthropologists argue that ethnocentrism may not always be bad. Hsu argues that there are two kinds of ethnocentrism: positive ethnocentrism and neutral ethnocentrism. Basically, people by nature will always consider their ways superior on a subconscious level, but it is how they react to other ways of behavior and thinking that separates positive and neutral ethnocentrism. Neutral ethnocentrism has no desire to change or destroy the ways it considers “inferior” (Hsu 1979). Positive ethnocentrism, on the other hand, is what causes the death of cultures. Western societies often fall prey to positive ethnocentric thinking. There are countless examples through the history of the harmful impacts of Western superiority. The Crusades, missionaries and forced conformity, and Manifest Destiny, to name a few. Western ethnocentrism is incredibly harmful and is set on changing or destroying cultures they deem unfit.

The response to ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, first came about through Franz Boas, another famous anthropologist. He rejected cultural evolutionism, and argued against the popular idea that cultures changed according to an “invisible hand” of biological law. Instead, he suggested that cultures were shaped by individuals and their environments, and that one culture

was not inherently superior or inferior because of their access to resources and technology. He also argued that cultures should be understood in their own contexts rather than be compared to other cultures. This idea came to be known as cultural relativism. Cultural relativism made it clear that cultures should not be judged by one's own cultural standard of ideologies, practices, and sense of right and wrong. In modern times, cultural relativism is becoming a controversial idea, and it all comes down to one thing: human rights. Both conservative and liberal anthropologists find that cultural relativism does not allow for a basic, universal understanding of what is right and wrong when it is apparent to them that what that culture does is inherently wrong. The issue is extremely complex, basically asking the question of where the line is drawn. At what point is a cultural custom a human rights violation? Can we evaluate other cultures based on our own standards of morality? Certainly, cultural relativism is a far better ideology than ethnocentrism, but it has caused controversy on a political, cultural, and anthropological scale.

Anthropologists face another issue impacted by ethnocentrism and cultural relativism: museums. Museums used to be organized according to cultural evolutionist standards. Civilizations that were deemed more advanced were grouped together, often placed strategically towards the front of the museum to draw attention towards the glory of Western society. Additionally, museums organized exhibits on different cultures as if they were biological specimens. Artifacts of similar shapes and sizes were placed together, even if they had little in common in terms of culture or context. Franz Boas criticized this method, and suggested instead the "cultural area" approach in museums. The "cultural area" approach relied on cultural relativism, and groups artifacts based on where they were found and which group they belonged

to. This method is widely used by museums today in the hopes that these artifacts can be provided with cultural context so they can be viewed through a relativistic lense.

Many people have criticized museums for how they acquire and display artifacts important to certain cultures. In fact, many museums do display many artifacts that were stolen from cultures without permission, and were appropriated for Western consumption. The most controversial artifacts are human remains. Museums such as the Smithsonian have held onto the remains of Native Americans, which aboriginal groups have protested for decades. Recently, museums have begun repatriating important cultural artifacts, including human remains. Repatriation is a complex, emotional process that takes years to complete. Many museum advocates argue that museums should keep the artifacts to preserve them and educate the public about the cultural significance of the object. Many others argue that because the objects do not belong to the museums, the museums do not have control over where the object goes. Another argument is that the prevention of cultural appropriation and desecration outweighs the need to “preserve historical artifacts”. Recently, museums have made more of an effort to return objects that were stolen from their cultural contexts. The Smithsonian, for example, has started returning the indigenous remains that populate their storage room.

Recognizing the problems with museums does not mean that museums are inherently bad, or must be destroyed. Museums are incredibly important institutions that preserve and educate. Repatriation is simply a method to ensure that museums can benefit everybody. As Laurence Douny writes, “the museum is the best means to prevent material culture from being stolen or sold to Westerners.” (Douny) Museums protect artifacts from commodification, being sold illegally, and being confined to private sectors forever. Through museums, artifacts can be

put on display with the original peoples' permission, and can be viewed in the appropriate context. As one Dogon villager remarked to Laurence Douny: "It is meant to prevent our precious objects from being smuggled and so to keep our history and our dignity intact because we see ourselves in [these objects]." (Douny) In this way, people learn about cultures without the barrier of ethnocentrism. They can be educated on the people they share their world with.

Museums are essential to how cultures are represented, and ethnocentrism and relativism alike contribute to that representation. Ethnocentrism nearly always creates a negative representation of other cultures. This is most apparent in the media, where cultures that are different from Western civilizations are portrayed as "alien" or "savage." This is done in two ways. First, by showing the actual culture itself in a negative light. This is used most often in media portrayals of indigenous peoples. Used especially in the mid-20th century and extended into modern times, the image of the "red savage" is used to demonize Native Americans. In books, movies, and team mascots, the harmful image creates the idea that these people are less than human simply because they are not white. The other way ethnocentrism plays into media representation is far more subtle. It involves creating a strange, alien cultural landscape that is not intended to represent a certain group, but these portrayals always include some element of real cultures, from appearances to behaviors. This leads to an association between that cultural and the alien one, and stems from the pre-existing notion that other cultures are strange and foreign, and "not normal." These representations that stem from positive ethnocentrism create harmful stereotypes that are ingrained into the subconscious. Recently, however, efforts have been made to change the way that other cultures are represented to Western peoples. For example, the way that the Dogon material identity has been commodified to tourists in order to

help educate them on Dogon identity. Rather than tourists taking cultural significant items, the Dogon creates objects specifically to be sold. Douny writes that “what is sold is the material representation of culture, not the practices, the agency, ontology, and efficacy of objects that is conveyed through magic.” (Douny)

Skeptics of the consequences that stem from certain modes of thinking will not see the connections between ethnocentrism and relativism, museums, media representation, and international politics. Yet the threads exist, forming an elaborate network of consequences that lead to unfair treatment of cultural groups on a global scale. For centuries, positive ethnocentrism has played a clear role in how global relations were executed, especially in Western societies. For example, it influenced how indigenous people were treated as barbaric savages when the first colonists migrated to North America from Europe, how people of African descent were forced into slavery and considered equal to “beasts,” how people of Asian descent were considered to be emotionless “creatures” during WWII. All of these interpretations are a result of Western superiority spawned from feelings of positive ethnocentrism. Even today, ethnocentrism plays a role in global politics, especially when people from Central America and Mexico are considered to be rapists and criminals when they dare to ask for help. Ethnocentrism influences the way nations interact on a global scale, and there are rarely any positive interactions. Lack of aid, lack of sympathy, lack of empathy for peoples from cultures Westerners consider “inferior” stems from ethnocentrism. Cultural relativism does not always have a positive effect on global politics, either. Many use cultural relativism as an excuse for inaction, or to shut down activism efforts abroad. Conventional cultural relativism can be used to excuse human rights violations, because “it’s just their way of doing things,” but anthropologists must be held to a universal paradigm of

human rights. (Brown 2008) What is described as a “pivotal moment in the trajectory of classical cultural relativism” (Brown 2008) is the American Anthropology Association’s criticism of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. This caused an uproar in the anthropology community, and the topic became heavily debated among American anthropologists. While some concerns expressed by the AAA were valid, it still gave the impression that cultural relativism was the “rejection of human rights.” (Brown 2008)

In conclusion, both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism are problematic in their own way. Ethnocentrism still exists on a national and international scale, and has nothing but harmful consequences. Classical cultural relativism presents excuses for human rights violations, but modern cultural relativism is making an effort to find the middle ground between universal human rights and respect for all cultures. Today, anthropologists are working towards reaching an ontological reality that benefits and educates people from all backgrounds and experiences.

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