



CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND THE CONFLICT OF PRINCIPLES

Corina MATEI

"Spiru Haret" University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *Considering the impact that cultural relativism is supposed to have in the future on many communities evolving under the apparently new form of acculturation – that is, globalization – my intention in this paper is to focus on its possible social and ideological consequences. It is well known that, as a research methodological principle, cultural relativism emerged from field anthropological studies, in times when the discipline called cultural anthropology was turning into a social science. After that, in many other (more or less) theoretical contexts we were assisting the development of a real relativism culture. Nowadays, things seem to reveal a different trend, maybe a conservative one, and that is a relevant phenomenon to be philosophically analyzed and debated, given its significant implications even on the shape of our future civilization.*

Keywords: *cultural anthropology, acculturation, cultural relativism, diversity*

More urgent than anytime has become our duty to learn to discover, in the Other and in his different nature, what is that thing binding us, that we have in common. In our increasingly crowded world there are very different cultures, religions, customs and values. It would be an illusion for one to believe that only a rational system of advantages – a sort of global economy religion, to say so – could fix the common human living on this planet which is becoming more and more crowded. [...] Science of Man, in its whole diversity, is becoming a moral and philosophical task for all of us.
Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Moștenirea Europei*

1. IN THE BEGINNING...

By its fundamental concept of *otherness*, cultural anthropology, the science of Man, was articulated as a social science studying other cultures – that is, other than the anthropologist's own culture. So, at the beginning of XXth century (starting, as I believe, with the works of the American researcher Franz Boas), this new approach of a great diversity of cultures all over the world generated a new methodological principle: *cultural relativism*; it has been created and used in field research as the only reasonable and neutral way to acknowledge and gather data concerning very different cultures, unlike the

former ethno-centric and thus prejudicial approach assuming that Western culture is the standard, were we to value any other culture.

As the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz summarizes (Geertz, 2000:63-65), cultural relativism was and still is simply claiming that *peoples of different cultures live in different worlds*. The implications of this: there's no common criterion for valuing and judging these worlds, there's no possible hierarchy of them. Thus, according to Geertz, there are two main trends which the science of Man brought in our contemporary thought by promoting cultural relativism: one is *the repositioning of horizons* and the other is *the de-centering of perspectives*. (Geertz, 2000:65)

CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND THE CONFLICT OF PRINCIPLES

In addition to that, it made possible the development of many trends and branches in anthropological studies, bringing significant results in revealing the unknown, by means of participative observation and empathetical integration in any foreign community, setting aside their community's standards. Almost everytime, the data offered by anthropologists were unveiling to "civilised" people new and surprising faces of Man, unusual customs and practices, strange beliefs, rituals, cults – in fact, a foreign side of Man depicted by a field discipline comprising the entire human geography and history of our planet. Many times their testimonies were shocking, and that's why Geertz is calling anthropologists "merchants of astonishment", but this is an assumed, professionally handled astonishment, in order to open minds, to emphasize the Difference, and to make anyone to admit there is no center and no edge of the world. Here is this researcher's creed: "We have, with no little success, sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers. It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle. [...] we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchants of astonishment." (Geertz, 2000:63)

2. ...AND MAYBE IN THE END

Of course, this anthropological principle of cultural relativism was imported in many other more or less theoretical domains, from axiology to politics, from humanist ideology to philosophy, and, while playing the vanguard role in lots of debates, it has itself been widely debated, sustained, attacked, altered, speculated etc.

In one of his books dedicated to this topic, the Romanian author Andrei Marga sets two characteristic assertions comprising its point:

- cultural facts always have a genesis context, and thus, they have also a non-transferable context-related significance;

- any sort of conceived *Weltanschauung* is only one perspective among the others, so no *Weltanschauung* could possibly be superior to all the others. (Marga, A., 2007:93) As other philosophers do (J. Rachels, B.

Williams), the author offers a lot of theoretical arguments against this principle, although there are other scholars who defend it¹, in spite of its obvious flaws, most of them being *logical* ones. But what it seems surprising is that, despite them, the ideology which this principle emerged today tends to impose it anyway.

As I believe, the *future* flows of cultural relativism as a principle of perceiving other cultures and communities appear when it comes to apply it to the globalization phenomenon, viewed by the Romanian researcher Mona Mamulea as a type of *acculturation* (Mamulea, 2007:123-135). The concept of acculturation was outlined in the past century, under the urge of treating problems of colonisation and imperialist politics. The Social Science Research Council in USA received in 1936 a *Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation* written by three influential scholars: Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton and Melville Herskovitz. They said: "Acculturation refers to the kind of phenomena emerging from the fact that groups of individuals of different origin cultures come to interfere continuously, directly, thus resulting changes of original cultural model of one group, or of each of them." (*apud* Mamulea, 2007:123) As they see, there are three possible ways of this process: first is *acceptance*, the second is *adaptation*, but the third, the conflictual one, is *reaction*, meaning the social movement of counter-acculturation, because of unexpected consequences after the initial acceptance of cultural changes, or because of the foreign culture's oppressive attitude. (Mamulea, 2007:124)

Given all these, my opinion is that the traditional anthropological respect for cultural diversity, for the irreducible plurality of cultures all over the world, each one having its value and its specific, beyond any comparison or hierarchy, is now fading under the pressure

¹ Even in contemporary press debates we can read opinions like the French philosopher's André Comte-Sponville: "all evaluations request some reference criteria, norms, and values which could only exist inside a certain civilization." (Comte-Sponville, "Noter l'Autre est absurde", in *Le Monde*, 24.02/2012:20).

CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND THE CONFLICT OF PRINCIPLES

of another principle; one can accept without hesitation the righteousness of the cultural relativism as long as we are referring to *remote* cultures which are different or even strange to us, to our values, norms and customs, but which *don't interfere with ours*. It is the spiritual acceptance from the beginnings of anthropology, with all its exotic testimonies that were culturally interesting to “civilised” peoples. I agree with Geertz, the defender of relativism, that if we wanted not to be astonished, shocked, altered, if we wanted only “home truths”, we should have stayed at home; but the actual problem is that, while staying at home and accepting the relativism *as a cultural and even esthetic principle*, we assist nowadays to the phenomenon of acculturation in many forms, including the one of negative *reaction*, as a consequence of immigration and of social movements that ethnic minorities are proceeding in their Western host cultures. The main issue is this: what will happen in the future with these host cultures facing more and more powerful movements of minorities’ identity emancipation, of imposing their foreign values and rules – from religious ones to clothing ones – on the cultures that adopted them? As an objective factor, their increasing influence is given by their demographical growth. So, it seems that the noble anthropological principle is canceled by the change of *cultural distances and positions: as long as two different cultures interfere to each other inside one of them, we finally have common ground for comparison and hierarchy*. And the basic criterion for judging whether some foreign values and norms are acceptable or not in the host culture is *the golden rule* – a moral principle more ancient than the relativist one and more

powerful, as it deals with matters of living together in harmony, or at least in a correct and sane social environment. According to the philosopher Antony Flew, the golden rule is teaching us *to behave towards others the way we would like them to behave towards us*. (Flew, 1999:289). No matter if one is a relativist or not, one will have to admit that this is a principle of human interaction which sets the foundation of any functional morals, without which the clash of civilizations, as well as of communities, couldn't be avoided. This principle of living together implies also, as a less demanding form, the moral principle that *one's liberty extends to the limits where it doesn't affect the liberty of others*. As I believe, just as in Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, there is also a hierarchy of a society's moral principles, settled by their importance for its preservation; given this context, the potential conflict of the two mentioned principles, the relativist one versus the golden rule, will result in the prevailing of the latter, because it is a conservative, survival code, rooted in humans' experience of living together than any other one.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Flew, Antony. (1999). *Dicționar de filosofie și logică*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
2. Geertz, Clifford. (2000). *Available Light*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
3. Mamulea, Mona, (2007). *Dialectica închiderii și deschiderii în cultura română modernă*. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române.
4. Marga, Andrei, (2007). *Relativism and Its Consequences. Relativismul și consecințele sale*. Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană.