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SYMPOSIUM: THE CULTURE CULT

# Romantic Primitivism and Moral Economy

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It would be hard to find a term that has engendered more insight and confusion than culture. How many people have been liberated by the epiphany that behavior they dislike is not biologically given, but can be learned and unlearned? How many people have been cast back into the dungeons of the inevitable, by feeling obliged to defend their culture? The confusion can be minimized by distinguishing between two very different meanings of the term. First, culture can refer to a standard of attainment. This first meaning is often synonymous with civilization but has many other applications including high culture, cultural capital, and etiquette. It is the older sense of the term and inevitably leads to ranking, of people who have met the standard versus others who have not, in ways that many Western intellectuals currently regard as bigoted. Second, culture can refer to a distinct way of life that supposedly distinguishes one human population from another, such as French versus German culture or Navaho versus Hopi culture, and that somehow constitutes the essence of the population. This is the meaning that Franz Boas inherited from the Kultur of the German Romantics and that he bestowed upon anthropology. It is also the meaning popularized by Margaret Mead and other American anthropologists, giving rise to the liberal premises of cultural relativism and multiculturalism. No one has a done a better job of criticizing the implications than the British social anthropologist Adam Kuper (1999). If everyone has the right to be culturally different, so do dictators, family despots, and segregationists. Tyrannizing their subjects, womenfolk or ethnic minorities just happens to be part of their culture, to practice which they therefore have the right.

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Most anthropologists are now very dissatisfied with defining culture either as a standard of attainment or as a distinct way of life. If the former encourages ethnocentrism, the latter can be used to justify nearly anything. Explicitly or implicitly, we now operate with a third approach that transcends both by going back to the simplest meaning of the term culture, as behavior that is learned rather than biologically innate. In this broadest sense, culture is our human capacity for imitating or learning from each other. In anthropology, only culture-as-social-learning is broad enough to encompass our current interest in class, ethnicity and gender, in identity and discourse, in power and hegemony, all of which run riot across any attempt to demarcate distinct cultures as separate spheres.

Since anthropologists are now very aware of the limitations of the first two usages, why do not we just ditch them and confine ourselves to the third? This is impossible because the tension between culture-as-standard-of-attainment and culture-as-distinct-way-of-life is deeply embedded in the history of anthropology. It defines our contribution to the social sciences and humanities and constantly resurfaces in debates over morals and authenticity. When political conflicts force anthropologists to make value judgments, the broad and generous ground staked out by the third approach has an uncanny way of disappearing beneath our feet. Suddenly we are obliged to fall back on defending universal standards or denying them.

To illustrate, how do you feel about cliterectomy as a rite of passage for adolescents? Should it be criminalized or tolerated? If you think it should be criminalized, you are upholding a universal human rights standard. If you think it should be tolerated, you are allowing the right to a distinct culture and its presumed merits to trump the universal standard. If you wish to remain non-judgmental, each side can accuse you of complicity with the other. When push comes to shove, some anthropologists fall back on the right

to be different. Other anthropologists fall back on Western civilization or human rights, and these include Roger Sandall.

In his 2001 book *The Culture Cult: Designer Tribalism and Other Essays*, Sandall takes aim at the second approach to culture, as a distinct way of life. Like Adam Kuper, he is acutely sensitive to how it not only has shaped the American school of anthropology but tantalized many Western intellectuals with its promiscuous endorsement of pre-state (or "primitive") ways of life. How this happened is very interesting. Viewing one's own in-group as superior to neighboring groups may not be inevitable in human affairs, but it is habitual and widespread. Critiquing ethnocentrism has long been a goal shared by anthropologists, which has pitched the discipline against both cultural and racial ranking. Indeed, our history of opposition to ranking is the reason that cultural relativism is anthropology's most famous product, and also our most problematic. When Boas established cultural relativism as a methodological axiom in the early twentieth century, the intent was that a person's beliefs and activities should be interpreted in terms of his or her own culture. But cultural relativism came to mean a good deal more than procedure. In public debates over race, immigration and changing moral values, anthropologists and their liberal allies turned cultural relativism into the bold principle that all cultures are equally worthy of respect. Meanwhile, the idea of cultures as distinct, organic wholes enabled anthropology to grab a place in American universities' division of labor. Not only did anthropology become a purveyor of non-Western, pre-modern exotica; this was a professional calling that resonated in the wider society, turning anthropology into a form of atonement for centuries of colonialism and racism. For Western intellectuals who prided themselves on progressive social views, an enlightened view of other cultures could salve a guilty conscience.

Sandall's genealogy of the noble savage serves him well until he reaches contemporary anthropology, about which he has little to say except that it has become solipsistic (p.68). Like most anthropologists who still regard themselves as empirical social scientists, he distrusts postmodern reinterpretations of anthropology which reject objectivity and science and prefer to focus on the critique of representations. Sandall implies that romantic primitivism is alive and well in postmodern anthropology, but many postmodernists would beg to differ, pointing to how they too have rejected the premise of cultures as discrete, organic wholes. They would also distrust Sandall's contrast between "open" and "closed" societies because it sounds like another manifestation of Western ethnocentrism, i.e., the definition of culture as a standard of attainment. Does this make them romantic primitivists? Not necessarily. Going back to cliterectomy as a litmus test, a postmodernist who is willing to process all the painful data on this practice is not a romantic primitivist. Only if s/he is overly eager to discount all the data on grounds of epistemological colonialism, or blame the practice on Western colonialism, or otherwise excuse it, would romantic primitivism swim back into view.

I am also dissatisfied with Sandall's explanation for romantic primitivism in terms of moral psychology. This quickly gets us back to resentment, which is a psychological explanation for an intellectual and social movement. I have no doubt that resentment is an accurate description of eighteenth century French radicals and of contemporary academics, but resentment is a near-universal human emotion. Most of us are very familiar with this state of mind because envy is a near-inevitable product of our capacity for imitating each other.

For an alternative framework of explanation, I propose moral economy. Since this is a term with more than one usage, let me clarify that I am not referring to 1) the wish to moralize an economy, such as regulating markets to protect vulnerable populations or 2) the analysis of how peasants resist capitalism with their own distinct morality, as theorized by E. P. Thompson and James C. Scott. Instead, I am referring to how groups of people use symbolic exchange to set up moral authority—or to put this more cynically, how people use symbolic exchange to persuade themselves that their pursuit of their interests is moral. Thus the moral economy of church and aristocracy used to revolve around the authority-building rituals of divinely-appointed kingship. The moral economy of their Enlightenment critics revolved around the ritual symbolism of Reason and Natural Man. And the moral economy of much contemporary debate revolves around the ritual deployment of victims.

Victimhood and its many inflections is, I believe, the easiest way to see how romantic primitivism continues to survive even among anthropologists who wish to disown it. Solidarity with victims is an old instrument in the Judaeo-Christian orchestra that has been playing louder as religion and science lose authority. Anthropologists and other academics are far from the only people who deploy victimhood—so does any practitioner of identity politics and religious fundamentalism. But anthropologists should be acutely aware of the dangers, especially those of us who pride ourselves on deconstruction. For anthropology I think the problem begins in graduate school, when we are young and eager and learning to play the hypocritical game that sociocultural anthropology is a science when it comes to asking for money but not a science when it comes to doing our research and publishing our results. Given that most sociocultural anthropologists have little regard for the pretensions of Western science, given our doubts that any particular truth will actually set us free, how do we justify

all the time and treasure lavished on our careers? The usual answer is a moral agenda, which typically includes solidarity with victims of Western colonialism.

D'Andrade's 1995 critique of "moral models" in anthropology is the best analysis of this phenomenon that I have seen. But how does a moral agenda generate romantic primitivism? Solidarity with indigenous people is especially complicated because our field of meaning for this term is a product of colonialism. Conceptually speaking, Native Americans did not come into existence until Europeans decided that the human populations of the western hemisphere should be lumped together under the heading of Indians. The Ixil Mayas with whom I work in Guatemala are still waking up to the idea that they are Mayas—Maya is a linguistic classification that certain political activists decided should be central to their lives. The idea has caught on, but with greater velocity among anthropologists, educators and international funders than among the Ixils. Such disconnects are legion in the moral battlegrounds of solidarity with indigenous people. Wherever you go, the question arises, precisely which indigenous people do you mean? The ones who made the most appealing claim on your conscience? That is the usual answer, which requires excluding all the grumps and misfits in the indigenous population who reject your moral agenda. The resulting perceptions are not necessarily primitivist, but they do tend to be romantic, even if that was not the intention of the tight-lipped radicalism which led to them. This is how romantic primitivism, or something very much like it, can reemerge even in what purports to be cutting-edge anthropological theory.

## References

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