Relativism and Cultural Universals

Description

Notes for my video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHQcainyoBo

Letâ??s start again from the conclusions of my last video, the one about a world tailored to idiots: man as the measure of all things. Some well-meaning souls have ironically dismissed that conclusion, thinking that Protagorasâ?? statement is somehow banal and taken for granted, if not outright obvious.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The concept expressed by the philosopher of Abdera, considered by some to be the first historical example of a relativistic view of reality, is very present in the history of thought and has been interpreted in many ways, often contradictory.

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If indeed man is the measure of all things, thus the perspective of each individual and every culture has equal dignity, one could also affirm that man is the constant in every human culture, which may suggest the existence of a concept that has intrigued me for a long time: that of a cultural universal.

Our Western culture comes from a long tradition of cultural absolutes, which are quite different from universals.

Having been the dominant culture of vast geographical areas for millennia and ultimately hegemonic of the planet, as Europeans and Westerners, from the times of Athens, through Rome, to the British and French dominations and colonialisms, down to the American version of this succession of empires, the West has been and still is home to a sensation of possessing values that many of us today perceive as universal. Examples include the dignity of the person and individual freedom, which have replaced absolute values like the superiority of the white man over all peoples and European civilization as the pinnacle of inevitable historical progress.

Not too paradoxically, in this same cultural context, and where else, the concept of â??cultural relativismâ?• was also born, which precisely allowed us to move from absolutes to universals, only to then abandon ourselves as prey to sometimes extreme relativism.

Anthropology developed in the 20th century laid the foundations for a vision of cultures as peculiar systems, with equal dignity. Thus, we moved from seeing, for instance, Australian aborigines as uncultivated savages to seeing them as bearers of their own rich culture worthy of respect and study.

This process of cultural relativization originates in Western society as an open society and is itself a product of our culture.

Anyone with even minimal experience of cultures, say, from the Middle East, North Africa, or Asia, has experienced firsthand the lack of interest those cultural areas seem to have in a relativistic view of culture.

In particular, cultures with strong religious foundations can hardly see culture as a relative matter. They may sometimes be pragmatically tolerant and inclusive, as was the case with the Turkish Empire in certain phases of its history, but these are very sporadic phenomena.

Incidentally, it should be noted that the periods when tolerance was practiced as a guideline for governance and society were also the times when Turkish civilization, otherwise rigidly Islamic, saw its peak, thanks to the welcoming of intelligences and energies fleeing from less tolerant and open places, like large parts of Europe in that era and many subsequent eras.

Religious thoughts inherently have the imperative to reject any form of cultural relativism, opposing it with absolute imperatives in the moral realm, dictated by the peculiar mythology of each religion.

This is true today as it was in the past, even in the West. The Catholic Church, not to mention the Russian Orthodox Church, strongly aligned with the politics of the Russian regime, see cultural relativism as a horrific enemy.

Similarly, 20th-century ideologies cannot tolerate relativism. On one hand, we have the Marxist political descendants with their deterministic and magically teleological view of history; on the other, the fascist ideologies based on race and supposed spirits and destinies of peoples, also blindly teleological.

These godless theologies full of prophets cannot tolerate alternative worldviews either, whether they are those proposed by antagonistic ideological groups within the same society, those from other civilizations, or contemporary â??primitiveâ?• peoples.

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It is unthinkable, within these ideological frameworks, that such heterodox doctrines could offer contributions to the culture of our time, as these â??others,â?• in these rigidly teleological views of history, are antagonists or, worse, remnants of an era surpassed by history itself. A real waste to be eliminated, even physically, to clear the way for tomorrow, which only the prophets of these ideologies have seen.

The open society is the only form of human aggregation that has made cultural relativism one of its founding aspects, using it as a key to understanding the intercultural complexity of the world.

Modern cultural anthropology, which originated not coincidentally in the same countries where the open society took the form of liberal and social democratic democracies, has irreversibly adopted a methodological approach based on a relativistic vision.

The root of this innovative key to understanding reality lies in the West, also due to a historical fact that should not be underestimated: it derives from the fundamental relativism of the physical sciences since Galilean relativity, the foundation of all modern physics and the seed of the more extensive Einsteinian relativity.

From there, relativism has been adopted in almost all other sciences, assuming truly different meanings when the humanities embraced it, eventually becoming part of the mental framework of large parts of our society.

This attitude, however, seems to lead to more than one paradox when applied pedantically, both in research and in our vision of human civilization as a whole.

Cultural anthropology has adopted relativism as a methodology but, apart from certain enthusiasts, this discipline has equipped itself with a skeptical and analytical relativism, keeping it on a pragmatic level and trying to avoid ideological drift towards an anarchic relativistic vision of ethics.

This kind of caution, which one would expect from a scientific discipline, is not found, however, in cultural relativism as it is embedded in society as a whole.

In fact, while initially, this subversion of the paradigm of our vision of human civilizations was meant to oppose with all its might what we will call â??cultural absolutes,â?• i.e., the ideological bases of the supremacist and racist attitude of Western culture towards other cultures, today, the extremization of this attitude seems to lead us towards a feeble immobility that rejects the need to push â??otherâ?• societies and Western society towards a convergent and shared perspective on human dignity and human rights, striving tirelessly for certain of our achievements to become the cultural heritage of all.

The reason is what we mentioned before: the â??otherâ?• societies, I would go so far as to say all societies that have not adopted a Western-style democratic model, are not interested in meeting us halfway, at least in the vision of the new absolutists of cultural relativism.

Excuse the paradoxical play on words, but the paradoxes that relativism and cultural absolutism can provoke are many.

Is the open society perhaps a goal of history, while having to avoid basking in teleological metaphysics by its very nature?

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Does cultural relativism therefore have to embrace the totalitarian vision of religions and ideologies as belonging to certain cultures?

Progress as a teleological process evidently does not exist, but is it not a fact that all peoples aim to improve their living conditions?

Does cultural relativism perhaps hide certain forms of crypto-racism, serving as a subtle way to keep the other at a distance? In certain anti-Western discourses, one cannot entirely exclude sensing something similar.

Paradoxes.

And, ultimately, demanding that democracy is an absolute value and that those who do not have it would want it, is it a form of cultural chauvinism?

Do the Iranians, and especially Iranian women, who revolt against the obscene theocratic regime that governs their country, still prefer it to an alternative regime of democracy and the rule of law because it is imported?

Do the Chinese thrive in their increasingly autocratic and militaristic political regime and prefer it, while those alienated from their culture are the Taiwanese with democratic inclinations?

Is the North Korean culturally destined to feed on grass from the meadows in a fully Orwellian existence while the deviants are the South Koreans, who have built an advanced economy in a society that, although peculiarly Asian, has embraced democratic life with all its limits?

Too many questions, which multiply even more if we also consider those raised by the many flaws of our Western societies.

Reflecting on these matters, one inevitably wonders whether there are invariant, incontrovertibly universal elements among the various human cultures.

Given that we know well how such an argument can be received from a European perspective, and to avoid being accused by our â??anti-Westernâ?• friends of neo-colonialist tendencies from a privileged white cisgender male, I like to start this reflection by involving the African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu and his book â??Cultural

Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective.â?•

Among the contributions of the Ghanaian philosopher to the issue of cultural universals is the proposal of a critical universalism, which recognizes that, despite cultural differences, there are some fundamental human values and principles that are universal. An intuitive point of view but well argued by him.

His reasoning starts from the assumption that since intercultural communication exists among all cultures, the existence of cultural universals can be demonstrated through reductio ad absurdum. If they did not exist, â??Intercultural communication would be impossible.â?•

These universal principles can be used as a basis for evaluating cultural practices, leading us to reject the idea of â??absolute relativism,â?• according to which cultural practices are all equally valid.

Wiredu argues that cultures can and should evolve. Critical evaluations can lead to cultural reforms, where harmful or archaic practices are modified or abandoned in favor of more just and humane practices. All this from a productive confrontation between cultures and their positive mutual influence. A global form of an open society.

It seems refreshing that one of the most important thinkers from the continent that has suffered the most from Western colonialism has built a bridge towards the society of rights produced by that same colonizing West.

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The criticisms raised against cultural relativism by

those who wish to defend it do not end here. In philosophical circles, it has been questioned whether the extremization of relativist thought cannot but lead to a nihilistic view of society.

An example is Ian Jarvieâ??s book â??Rationality and Relativism.â?• The student of Popper aims to establish a balance between the need to recognize the validity of different cultural perspectives (relativism) and the importance of maintaining some degree of objective and universal standards of rationality.

We are facing a strong criticism of extreme tendencies in cultural relativism, arguing that an overly permissive view can lead to a form of radical relativism, which denies any possibility of objective judgment or evaluation. At the same time, Jarvie acknowledges the limits of rationality as conceived from a Western perspective, calling for greater openness to the different forms of logic and reasoning present in various cultures.

These are clearly similar reflections to those found at the roots of cultural anthropology, in LÃ©vi-Strauss, when he states, â??Savage thought is logical in the same way as ours, but only in cases where ours applies to the knowledge of the universe to which it simultaneously recognizes physical and semantic properties.â?•

Thus, it seems that human thought shares at least a common logical basis regardless of belonging to one civilization or another, however simple or structured it may be.

Going a bit more concrete, what could be the cultural universals, this sort of hypothetical native code common to every culture?

One of the lists reported by the few who care about this subject is, more or less, the following:

Language and Communication: All human societies have developed a form of language to communicate. Language can vary greatly in structure, but all languages and other possible forms of language provide a means to express ideas, desires, and emotions. Moreover, any language can be translated into any other.

Social Norms and Laws: Every culture has a set of rules that govern acceptable behavior within society. These may include formal laws as well as unwritten social norms.

Rituals and Ceremonies: Ritual practices, which can range from rites of passage to celebrations of community or religious events, are common to all cultures. These rites often mark important life stages or seasonal events.

Family Structures and Kinship Systems: Although the composition and definition of â??familyâ?• can vary, every society recognizes certain kinship ties and organizes individuals into family structures.

Art and Aesthetic Expression: All cultures produce some form of art, whether it be music, dance, painting, sculpture, poetry, or other forms of creative expression. Art seems to reflect universal cultural values and human experiences.

Concepts of Ethics and Justice: Although specific laws and ethical norms may differ, every society has concepts of right and wrong that guide moral behavior and justice decisions.

Religion and Spirituality: Although specific religious beliefs and practices vary widely, the tendency to believe in spiritual or divine forces and to practice forms of worship appears universal.

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Therefore, summarizing and stripping it down: language, law, rituals, family, art. One could indeed argue that some of these concepts are at least seemingly redundant.

At a first reading of this widespread list, at least some omissions immediately stand out: the economy, for example. All peoples have in one way or another created a form of economy that allows individuals to exchange goods and services.

Then there is humor. Someone (Bateson) believes that this too should be included among human cultural universals.

Brown, among dozens (hundreds) of others, mentions cooking, which he links to the ubiquitous knowledge of fire by all current humans. We are all united by a common sense of taste. In general, our senses unite us.

Christakis mentions eight, including love and friendship.

Anthropological and sociological studies cite other lists, not always overlapping, many of several dozen if not hundreds. There have also been statistical studies on cultural universals.

One could go on trying to create lists to the point of getting sick, but this is not the place: the lists are endlessly extended, and the task of compiling and comparing them eventually falls on the anthropological and sociological analysis of universals.

Here I am trying to observe the matter from a philosophical and cultural, and anyway very synthetic perspective.

The topic is very interesting, and I invite you to read some of the books and publications I leave in the description. Some I have explicitly mentioned, others not. There is really a lot to enjoy.

The point is obvious, but I will use Wireduâ??s words to avoid irritating accusations of simplistic reduction: â??What unites us? At least the beginning of an answer is easy. It is our biological-cultural identity as Homo sapiens.â?•

Obvious, indeed, but not trivial if kept as a firm point of a critical and aware reflection.

The senses, the upright posture, the ten fingers, the opposable thumb, our adaptable brain, binocular vision, our common needs and universal primal fears, as well as a still largely unexplored but certainly vast range of innate components of the human mind, make us all human in the same way.

The differences between individuals and between cultures are an evident fact, but we must mitigate our need to relativize to respect the other, as Wiredu repeatedly emphasizes from his African perspective, first of all because â??Human rights are claims that people have the right to make simply by virtue of their status as human beings.â?•

What drove me to this reflection is the need to rethink what makes us all human, but also to fortify myself against those who advocate a relativistic view of rights and freedoms, arguing that â??the individual does not existâ?• in other cultures. It has rightly been said that our view of the individual as the subject and object of inalienable and universal rights is not at all ancient. That is correct.

However, claiming that the societies behind ours â?? namely Nazi Germany with the legalized extermination of the different, American eugenic hallucinations, the racist basis of the British Empire, the Roman Empire with slavery as an economic foundation, ancient Greece with the view of the barbarian as non-human â?? did not conceive the individual is as foolish as asserting that contemporary societies, subjected to obscene regimes like the Iranian, Afghan, or Chinese ones, are in this unacceptable situation because they do not consider the individual important.

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I have greatly prolonged myself, so I want to conclude, leaving open the possibility of returning to analyze this interesting topic in the future.

I conclude by saying that when we must equip ourselves with cognitive tools to understand the world, a key factor for truly free thinking is a strongly critical approach, as much as possible purified of ideologies, beliefs, and prejudices, but also of a misunderstood tolerance towards unacceptable practices and ideas.

Humanity has only one path to eliminate the greatest evil and the most horrific primal urge, namely war, a mutual understanding that, however, opposes very precise limits to what is unacceptable.

In this, the open society can no longer be feeble and submissive but must reclaim pride in its achievements and fight for the rights we have obtained for ourselves to gradually become the heritage of all humans.

The alternative is a future where these rights will be possessed by no one, anywhere.

Best regards.

Sources:

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Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries

Cultural Universals

Standard Cross-Cultural Sample

â??Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspectiveâ?• by Kwasi Wiredu

â??Rationality and Relativism: In Search of a Philosophy and History of Anthropologyâ?• by Ian Jarvie

â??Human Universalsâ?• by Donald E. Brown

â??Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Societyâ?• by Nicholas Christakis

â??The Humor in Human Communicationâ?• by Gregory Bateson

â??The Open Society and Its Enemiesâ?• by Karl Popper

â??Cultural Relativism â?? In Defense of Free Thoughtâ?• by Angela Biscaldi

â??Cultural Relativism Perspectives in Cultural Pluralismâ?• by Melville J. Herskovits

â??The Savage Mindâ?• by Claude LÃ©vi-Strauss (on the issues of the Italian edition of this classic, see: The Savage Mind of LÃ©vi-Strauss Between First and Second Edition: A Case Study)

Cultural Relativism in Treccani Encyclopedia

Cultural universal

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1. Uncategorized

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