

## **Cultural Pluralism versus Culture in the Singular**

Nigel Rapport (male) and Jonna Overing (female)

Anthropology is the study of human race, especially its religions, development, customs and beliefs. It is the study of other cultures. Culture is one of the crucial concepts of the discipline. The focus of anthropology is diversity of cultures; the way people live. From this diversity, anthropological notion of culture was derived in the twentieth century. The idea of the plurality of culture contrasts with the culture in the singular.

Culture in the singular: western imperialist idea

The idea of the culture in the singular was developed in the eighteenth century and became predominant in the nineteenth century in Europe. It was framed through social evolutionary thought linked to western imperialism. It assumed a universal scale of progress and the idea that mankind and human civilization developed through time. They thought growth of rationality and culture belonged to the same process. Human beings became more cultivated as they progressed over time intellectually, spiritually and aesthetically.

De Certeau (1994) notes that such a model, which proclaims culture as a defining feature of cultivated human beings can have a strong political agenda, and in the hands of empires it has served a rather useful tool for introducing elitist norms wherever they imposed power.

Modern anthropological stance:

- ☐ Cultural relativism

- Confrontation with racism
- Culture is plural and is judged only within its particular context

Franz Boas:

- All cultures have equal value of their own in their own specific context
- It is wrong to associate technological power with social and cultural superiority.
- Culture is reflected in artefacts, institutions and patterns of behavior of the respective community.
- Culture pertains to that huge proportion of human knowledge and ways of doing things that is acquired, learned and constructed, that is not innate to a newborn child.

The anthropological notion of culture in the plural is not straightforward. The concept of culture in this sense is associated with a range of overlapping meanings, the approach being used, various questions being asked and a political point we wish to use to make.

Anthropology has been engaged in the controversy over the meaning of the term culture. Edwin Ardener (1985) foresaw an abrupt shift for anthropology from the high modernist era of the anthropological grand narratives of Marxism, structural functionalism and structuralism.

The concept of culture is still controversial methodologically, epistemologically and politically. There are a number of questions about the status of culture's reality which have not been resolved. To resolve this problem some agreement is necessary. The discussion for consensus would create anthropology relevant for twenty first century academic and political concerns.

## **The critique of cultural homogeneity and culture's objective reality**

Boas introduced the idea of plurality of historically conditioned cultures into anthropology. Culture is ongoing creative process through which people continually incorporate and transform new and foreign elements. Through such adaptations a culture arrives at an integrated spiritual totality.

But the discipline has not followed his insistence. The ideas that cultures refer to a systematically harmonized whole with each therefore comprising a shared and stable system of beliefs, knowledge, values or sets of practices held sway for a very long time in anthropology.

This notion of homogeneity of culture is strongly embedded in all functionalists, structural functionalist and structuralist thought. This notion of homogeneity of culture flourished and developed in the direction of the fixity, coherence and boundedness of cultures.

Fabian (1998) considers culture as something real, to be found outside the minds of individuals and objectified in the form of a collection objects, symbols, techniques, values, beliefs, practices and institutions that the individuals of a culture share.

Portraying cultures as having objective reality is likely to develop anthropology as scientific study. Durkheim said that the discovery of human sciences' own distinctive object would provide scientific methodology for the study of human behavior.

Evan Prichard objected to this and claimed that the methodology of the discipline should be situated within the humanities and not the natural sciences.

The notion of culture as a coherent, bounded and stable system of shared beliefs and actions has been a powerful twentieth century idea.