

Cultural Relativity

It was against this background that Franz Boas, an American anthropologist of German birth, developed

the concept of cultural relativity. He rejected the ethnocentric judgments of the 19th century evolutionists, and insisted that each culture should be intensively studied as a separate entity. He also insisted that each culture needs to be understood in terms of its own unique background and circumstances. Rather than judging another culture, or even any practice of another culture, by our own ethnocentric standards, Boas said that the practices and customs of another culture should be understood only in terms of its *own* context and its *own* standards. This, then, was the doctrine of cultural relativity: that all customs are relative to a particular cultural context; that is, they stem from that context, are meaningful only in that context, and should be understood only in terms of that context.

Franz Boas has sometimes been called the father of American anthropology, and he certainly set the predominant tone of the field for the first half of this century. The cultural relativity that he espoused became the dominant philosophical stance of both anthropology and sociology. My own training in those fields included that philosophical position, becoming an outlook that I adopted whole-heartedly, and advocated in my teaching—even defending its merits in a College Forum debate many years ago with Bob Casier, Tim Fetler, and Laura Boutilier.

Probably one of the more vigorous exponents of the doctrine of cultural relativity was Melville Herskovits, a student of Franz Boas. He formulated what has become one of the basic statements of cultural relativity: "Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise." Herskovits rejected the notion that our culture, or any culture, has exclusive possession of a set of absolute standards by which all other cultures can be judged. He rejected any such claim as just another example of ethnocentrism.

All such evaluations, Herskovits insisted, are relative—not just evaluations that involve judgments of what is good and bad, but also evaluations as to what is right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal. Even our perception of the world around us is conditioned and influenced by culture, so that truth and reality themselves become relative, each culture with its own unique view of reality, again with no way to prove that any one view is superior to any other.

Herskovits went on to draw one more important conclusion from these premises. Since there are no absolute values, since all values are relative, since there is no way to demonstrate that any one set of values, or practices, or customs, or morals, or truths is any more valid than any other, it behooves us then to have tolerance and respect for other cultures. Herskovits put it this way: "Cultural relativism is a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own."