The Relativity of Cultural Relativism

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Summary

Although the author in an earlier publication (1971) has argued in favour of cultural *relativism,* recently he has become more critical of the concept, as it inevitably leads to an aporia.

The concept of intercultural relativism has become blurred with intracultural relativism. The sharply increased communication between the various cultures has led to an increasing differentiation *within* these cultures and less differentiation *between* cultures. The other cultural conventions can be found next door, in another cultural community, in another subculture or in another social class. (This pertains to South Africa as well as Northwest-Europe). Geographically based typologies do no longer apply to culture and literature in our century.

Moreover, the notion of cultural relativism contains an internal contradiction. As Ruth Benedict (1935) argued, cultural relativism itself is the expression of a value; it means that my values are not necessarily better than the values maintained by someone else belonging to a different culture. Being a western invention going back to the eighteenth century, cultural relativism, by its own standards, cannot be applied to cultures which do not share the notion of tolerance vis-à-vis the values of other cultures. This paradoxical consequence prevents any rigorous application of cultural relativism.

Finally, with reference to Tzvetan Todorov (1991) and the human rights discussion, it is argued that certain values can be *declared* to have universal validity.

Opsomming

Alhoewel die outeur hom in 'n vroeëre publikasie (1971) ten gunste van kulturele relativisme uitgespreek het, het hy onlangs meer krities teenoor die konsep ingestel geraak, omdat dit onvermydelik tot aporie lei.

Die konsep interkulturele relativisme is verdof deur intrakulturele relativisme. Die snel toenemende kommunikasie tussen die verskillende kulture het tot 'n toenemende differensiasie *binne* hierdie kulture gelei met verminderde differensiasie *tussen* kulture. Die ander kulturele konvensies is net langsaan beskikbaar in 'n volgende kulturele gemeenskap, in 'n ander subkultuur en in 'n ander sosiale klas. (Dit geld vir Suid-Afrika sowel as Noordwes-Europa). Geografies-baseerde tipologieë is nie meer van toepassing op die kultuur en letterkunde van ons eeu nie.

Bowendien bevat die idee van kulturele relativisme 'n interne kontradiksie. Soos trouens deur Ruth Benedict (1935) aangevoer, is kulturele relativisme op sigself die verwoording van 'n waarde; dit beteken dat my waardes nie noodwendig beter is as die waardes van die volgende persoon wat aan 'n andersoortige kultuur behoort nie. As 'n westerse uitvindsel wat na die agtiende eeu terugdateer, kon kulturele relativisme, volgens sy eie standaarde, nie op kulture toegepas word wat nie die idee van verdraagsaamheid ten opsigte van die waardes van ander kulture eerbiedig nie. Hierdie paradoksale uitvloeisel verhoed enige streng toepassing van kulturele relativisme.

Ten slotte, met verwysing na Tzvetan Todorov (1991) en die bespreking van menseregte, word daar geargumenteer dat onomwonde *verklaar* kan word dat sekere waardes wel universele geldigheid besit.

The topics discussed in literary studies change with amazing speed. This applies to the notion of cultural relativism, but not only to this term. It may be useful to remind ourselves of the fact that 25 years ago literary studies were almost inextricably connected with evaluation. Whether one read René Wellek, F.R. Leavis, Emil Staiger, or Hans Teesing, interpretation and

evaluation were supposed to go hand in hand. In those days, terms such as research, explanation or problem solving were rarely used, and if explanation was mentioned as a scholarly aim in literary studies, usually historical explanation was meant, which inevitably implies interpretation and judgment.

Interpretation and evaluation depend heavily on a subjective position and, therefore, are rooted in one particular cultural instance, one particular place and time, which is not repeatable, irreplaceable, and far from relative. Discussing historical relativism in *Theory of Literature* (1949), René Wellek rejected the attempt "to enter into the mind and attitudes of past periods and to accept their standards, deliberately excluding the intrusions of our own preconceptions" (Wellek and Warren 1949: 32), and although these words were written as a criticism of historical relativism, they also applied to cultural relativism.

It appears that Wellek's view of historical and cultural relativism was based on a personal preference. Others, such as Erich Auerbach, Harry Levin and Bernard Weinberg presented arguments for a different opinion, defending varying shades of historical relativism (cf. Fokkema 1971).

In anthropology one sees similar differences of opinion. In the 1930s Ruth Benedict argued in favour of "the recognition of cultural relativity" in her famous *Patterns of Culture*. And together with other American anthropologists she resisted the attempt of the United Nations to finalize a text for the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." The American Anthropological Association submitted a statement to the Commission on Human Rights emphasizing that the declaration of human rights should

> do more than just phrase respect for the individual as an individual. It must also take into full account the individual as a member of the social group of which he is part, whose sanctioned modes of life shape his behaviour, and with whose fate his own is thus inextricably bound.

The statement of the American Anthropological Association was based on

> the principle that man is free only when he lives as his society defines freedom, that his rights are those he recognizes as a member of his society
>
> (American Anthropologist 49 1947: 539)

This cautious and sophisticated statement shows the full complexity of the problem. There are good reasons to see human rights as connected to the society in which one has been raised, but this cultural relativist position sentences all individuals to remain subject to the rules of their own society. The statement of the American Anthropological Association made the idea of human rights subservient to local interpretations, including interpretations by totalitarian or otherwise cruel regimes. The politicians decided to ignore the relativist objections of the anthropologists, and from hindsight I believe this was a wise decision, endorsed not only by Amnesty International but also by Lévi-Strauss. Different from Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits and other American anthropologists, Claude Lévi-Strauss has expressed the straightforward opinion that "the human mind is everywhere one and the same and. . .has the same capacities" (1978: 19).

What are we to make of these different positions? Is cultural relativism still a useful concept? Whether implicitly or explicitly, cultural relativism plays an enormous role in our discipline. This is indeed partly because it is so closely connected to value judgments which traditionally are connected with the perception of literary texts.

Cultural relativism can be defined as a way of perceiving things within their own cultural context. It is not a method of research, even less a theory: rather, it refers to a moral stance which, however, may influence the scholar in the definition of concepts, the selection of research methods and theoretical positions. In anthropology as well as in literary studies, the acceptance of cultural relativity was certainly a step forward in comparison to the older claim of the superiority of European civilization. Ruth Benedict emphasized that "the recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values," such as tolerance of other, equally valid patterns of life (1935: 200).

The principle of cultural relativism has my full sympathy and probably also that of most readers, but it does not always work and may lead us into an aporia. Hence the contradicting views on cultural relativity, some being in favour such as Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits, and others being against, such as Lévi-Strauss. Similar opposing views were expressed by literary scholars. Let us try to find out where and in what respect cultural relativism may apply.

The necessity of cultural relativism may appear if we explore the possibility of universal concepts. Imagine we are interested in the question whether literature is a universal phenomenon or not. Since the word "literature" or a more or less precise translation of the term is not available in all languages, we first must have an operational definition of the term. Perhaps we may assume that the manifestations of verbal art in different cultures share an aesthetic function, which roughly can be explained as a conventional relation between certain formal or contextual features on the one hand and their capability of eliciting an aesthetic experience in particular groups of recipients – an experience which results from the awareness that the text at hand does not refer in any direct sense to an established model of reality and does not contain practical suggestions for immediate action, but nevertheless has significance. Sometimes these texts are called metaphoric or fictional.

However, by emphasizing the aesthetic convention as a distinctive characteristic of literary communication, we have not only used a distinction which has clearly been operative in European culture only since the eighteenth century (Schmidt 1989), but we have also ignored the various degrees of osmosis which, in different cultures, exist between aesthetic, ethical, religious, cognitive and utilitarian values. Even if we would restrict ourselves to modern times, the relations between these various kinds of values differ in the various cultures. We probably can maintain that in the Arabic, Chinese, Euroamerican, Indian and Japanese cultures the differentiation between aesthetic, ethical, religious, cognitive and utilitarian has been made, but the possibility or even obligation of combining these various values differs from culture to culture, and, within these cultures, from time to time (cf. Fokkema 1984).

Perhaps one could argue that in Indian culture the combination of aesthetic and religious values occurs more often than in twentieth century Euroamerican culture, where the combination of aesthetic, cognitive and utilitarian values seems to be dominant. I am not sure, however, that such rough typologies will be very helpful, as they ignore developments in time and other differentiations within a culture. Would, for instance, it be possible to bring symbolism and socialist realism together in one typological compartment? To what extent would a characterization of twentieth century European literature which accounts for symbolism as well as socialist realism be different from a characterization of twentieth century Chinese literature which also comprises symbolism and socialist realism? This example shows abundantly clear that geographically based typologies no longer apply to culture and literature in our century. Nowadays, differences *within* the major cultures seem to be larger than the differences *between* cultures. Perhaps a typology of cultures can be useful if applied to traditional cultures which existed in relative isolation and were organized in a rather homogeneous way (cf. Fokkema 1978), but it does not work in our age. Of course, there are many differences between the various manifestations of world literature, but apart from linguistic diversity these differences – at least in our century – cannot be pinned down to correlations with particular locations. And even the restriction of a geographically based linguistic diversity is becoming increasingly invalid as a result of the voluntary and involuntary mobility of people all over the world.

The sharply increased communication between the various cultures has led to an increasing differentiation *within* these cultures and less differentiation *between* cultures. The other cultural conventions can be found next door, in another cultural community, in another subculture or in another social class.

So far we discussed the possibility of characterizing the literary communication in different cultures as being based on the aesthetic convention, but we must conclude that this is a rather bleak solution, as it ignores the sort of emphasis the aesthetic experience in the various cultures would receive. A further differentiation between the various cultures along geographical lines does not seem a sensible thing to pursue, because, at least in modern times, the differences between the major, geographically based cultures seem to be less great than the differences within these cultures. The conclusion must be that all difficulties which the examination of the aesthetic convention will encounter if it engages in intercultural research, will also be met in intracultural research. Due to increasing tensions within our own culture we can now embrace the idea of the world as a global village.

This has consequences for the use of the notion of intercultural relativism which now has become blurred with intracultural relativism. However, there are also other reasons why cultural relativism is not a strong concept. Cultural relativism contains an internal contradiction. As Ruth Benedict correctly argued, cultural relativism itself is the expression of a value; it means that my values are not necessarily better than the values maintained by someone else belonging to a different culture. Being a western invention going back to the eighteenth century, cultural relativism, by its own standards, cannot be

applied to cultures which do not share the notion of tolerance vis-à-vis the values of other cultures. This paradoxical consequence has prevented any rigorous application of cultural relativism. In fact, the moral position which underlies the notion of cultural relativism can itself be considered to be culturally relative, but we cannot, as a consequence, abandon cultural relativism in favour of Eurocentrism or sinocentrism or Islamic fundamentalism, since this would be felt to be, from an international point of view, a less workable and less viable solution.

As a somewhat different, concrete example of the aporia into which cultural relativism may get us, I would like to comment on a rather disquieting contribution to the May 1991 issue of *PMLA*, an article by Betty Jean Craige: "Literature in a Global Society." It displays an astonishing lack of discrimination between epistemological and evaluative issues, between knowledge and criticism, and demonstrates the impossibility of a rigorous application of cultural relativism.

Betty Craige observes that, as a result of increased communication, the world indeed has become a global village. She uses the term "cultural holists" to describe scholars

> who view the whole of society as an evolving system of interacting cultures, none of which enjoys any absolute superiority to any other. . . .In the academy, cultural holists, among whom may be found feminists and leftist political activists, are abandoning the traditional ranking of literature over nonliterature, and of Western culture over other cultures and appreciating instead the world's variety of human expression. The effect of their scholarship and teaching is to celebrate 'hybridity, impurity, intermingling'."
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> (Craige 1991: 397)

In this context, Craige refers to Salman Rushdie, of whom she quotes the last three words, and to the canon discussion which seems to divide North America. She speaks of the

> current battle within the discipline of literary study between traditionalists, who wish to retain a Western 'masterpiece' curriculum, and their cultural-holist opponents, who want a curriculum illustrative of the world's cultural diversity.
> (Craige 1991: 397)

Although I have some sympathy for Craige's universalist views and certainly for her argument to include *The Satanic Verses* among the books to be studied, I am sure that a canon or list of primary works – for that is what she means by curriculum – illustrative of the world's cultural diversity will not appear satisfactory. Our moral and aesthetic values are so much tied up with relevance to our particular place in the world, that it is useless to demand that they be universal or culturally holistic. Our value judgments remain necessarily local and subjective. We may try to enlarge our local space and subjectivity, we may try to identify with faraway pleasures or disasters as much as we can, but it will always be possible to criticize our egocentrism, just as Madame Verdurin in "A la Recherche du temps perdu" was obliquely criticized by the narrator for dipping her croissant in her breakfast coffee and

eating it, while reading about the sinking of the Lusitania and the drowning of many hundreds of people (Fokkema & Ibsch 1988: 157).

By definition our value judgments will remain subjective, bound to the place where we live. It is indeed far-fetched to believe that young people would want to be educated by reading non-literary material from countries they have never heard of. The hidden assumption, of course, is that there is valuable stuff outside official literature. I guess that Craige does not have the telephone guide of Baghdad in mind, but excluding that source implies a new ranking and a new hierarchy, which would contradict a balanced representation of "the world's variety of human expression."

As soon as one sets oneself a didactic goal and engages in value judgments, the aporia of cultural relativism is unavoidable. But also if we are to define concepts, such as literary communication or ethical notions, we will soon get into terminological difficulties if we maintain the principle of cultural relativism. For how can we know that our terms have the same semantic content as in the other culture? In the best case, cultural relativism may lead to a dialogue on equal footing, in which opinions are exchanged, questions asked and possibly answered. Indeed, the principle of cultural relativism may play a helpful role in discussions between groups of people belonging to different cultures. However, the kind of knowledge we may acquire in this process hangs closely together with the notion of relevance to what we already know or wish to know. We certainly may be interested to know more about the way people live in other cultures, either far away or nearby, but it is a mistake to believe that we will be able to persuade ourselves to accumulate knowledge that is completely irrelevant to our own present or future condition or to that of our children. Our knowledge of things will be structured and related to our lifeworld, or non-existent. Our intention to know may embrace the whole world, but will always be located in an individual self, whose range of action and comprehension is restricted.

I argued that by exploring the application of universal concepts we may become convinced of the necessity of cultural relativism. However, since the limits of cultural relativism can be easily envisaged, we must consider the opposite position as well: where cultural relativism leads to an aporia, we may resort again to universal concepts – just as the politicians in the United Nations did in response to the statement of the American Anthropological Association.

One will accept that there are certain human needs which are universal, such as the need for food, shelter and peace. In addition, there are some values that perhaps are not universally being upheld, but that can be *declared* to have universal validity. Values are maintained on a conventional basis and we may decide to introduce and maintain new conventions in support of new or old values. In fact, if people write a constitution this is exactly what they are doing. When Lévi-Strauss wrote that "the human mind is everywhere one and the same and. . .has the same capacities," he was expressing a view that, of course, can be contradicted, as any definition of a concept can be. However, he must have believed that the idea of the unity of the human race had a strategic value. Recently, Tzvetan Todorov, in an essay "Remarques

sur le croisement des cultures" (1991), made another attempt to defend the idea of "l'unité du genre humain." Let me repeat, the idea of the unity of the human race is not the outcome of research, but a strategic concept which may be a starting point in research as well as a principle in politics. The justification of the concept lies exclusively in the frightening consequences of its appalling opposite.

Todorov argues that the assumption of the universal validity of certain concepts, such as the unity of the human race, is a prerequisite for research about differences between human beings. He argues that we cannot compare, unless there is a common basis for comparison. Scientific research seems to require the construction of concepts with a general or possibly universal validity to steer our perception. In fact, the notion of cultural relativity itself is such a general concept that enables us to see differences.

Universal validity may also be claimed for certain procedures for acquiring knowledge. It is often argued that at least three criteria can be used for judging empirical theories. Traditionally one has distinguished: (1) the criterion of the correspondence of assertions with empirical reality; (2) the criterion of the coherence of theories with other accepted theories; (3) the criterion of consensus among researchers. These three criteria have been applied separately and in conjunction. Are they universally valid?

The three criteria have proven to be helpful in judging the merits of scientific research. They have been instrumental in producing viable results, and if they cannot be considered universally valid, we could declare them universally applicable for *strategic reasons.* We may do so, because a cultural relativistic position with respect to judging the reliability of research does not seem to work and is also rarely advocated, certainly not in physics, probably not in medicine, psychology and linguistics, but maybe with respect to research about literary communication – and if the latter type of research would be the only one where cultural relativism is applied for the evaluation of research, we should feel uneasy about it. For there is nothing in research about literary communication that should warrant an exceptional treatment, different from other types of research in which human beings are involved.

Recently, at least in Western Europe where frontiers are erased and in Eastern Europe where new boundaries have been drawn, the notion of cultural identity has received much attention. It serves to emphasize the cohesion of group cultures, based on ethnicity or the use of a particular language or a common history. Groups that share a particular set of cultural conventions want to be recognized as such. From a semiotic point of view, this is understandable. For, if the cultural identity of an individual or group of individuals can be quickly established, communication with them will be facilitated.

However, the cluster of conventions which a group of individuals share can be rather restricted and be felt to be restrictive. In other respects the individuals of that group may have more in common with the individuals of other groups. I may share only few conventions with my fellow countrymen, but many with my Japanese colleagues teaching comparative literature.

Therefore, the recent emphasis on cultural identity should not make people blind to things they have in common with other groups. The focus on cultural identity may easily provide an alibi for local absolutisms. It is a *strategic decision* not to overemphasize the importance of cultural identity. In any case, we should not allow the notion of cultural identity to interfere with well-tested scientific procedures, strategic concepts such as the unity of mankind, or norms that are vital to the survival of our global village.

All chaos and violence in the world have been inflicted by human beings upon other human beings. These same human beings are in the position to take the best concepts and norms that they have found and to create a platform from where they convincingly may argue that some of these concepts and norms deserve to be declared universally valid.

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