



CULTURAL ETHNOCENTRISM, CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND CULTURAL PLURALISM

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We note in the present discussions the effectiveness of a trilemma between whose options it would be necessary to choose (whoever contests cultural relativism will be classified as ethnocentrist or as pluralist, etc.), we denounce what could be the source of this trilemma, and we propose a fourth way through which we can free ourselves from the system of disjunctions noted.

1. The Increase in Immigration Resuscitates the Debate between Relativism and Ethnocentrism.

In recent years, and as a result of the increase of immigrants from the so-called "third world" to the various countries of Europe, the debates between cultural relativists or integrationists and the "intolerant" who demand the adaptation of the immigrant to the culture of the host country have resurfaced with great virulence. And this is without prejudice to the fact that "adaptation" requires, on the part of the one who must adapt, to get rid of institutions considered as "signs of identity" of the culture of origin (for example: the chador, the burqa, polygamy, clitoral ablation, circumcision, the lip disc, voodoo, the institution of visiting husbands, the penalty of stoning or mutilation, vendetta, etc.).

The accusations that the defenders of cultural relativism, or the defenders of pluralism, direct against those who do not share their points of view, are usually channeled through something they consider to be the most terrible denunciation: "ethnocentrism." To be accused of ethnocentrism is as much, practically, as to be accused of being intolerant, intransigent, archaic, racist, violator of human rights, "puppet of the most conservative right wing", and ignorant of the ABC of modern Anthropology, characterized ad hoc precisely as a discipline constituted from the perspective of pluralism or cultural relativism.

And, in fact, Anthropology, as a scientific discipline, began in the 19th century (Edward Burnett Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, etc.), not to mention its precedents (Joseph François Lafiteau, Charles de Brosses, etc.), recognizing the plurality of cultures (understood as "cultural spheres"); a plurality that seemed to be linked to the comparative methods characteristic of the new discipline.

Cultural pluralism, at the stage of anthropological evolutionism (Morgan, Friedrich Engels) often seemed compatible with the postulate of a possible confluence of the various cultural spheres in a universal Civilization. A postulate that many considered as concealing a cultural monism, and even an ethnocentrism of European sign, given that "Civilization" was generally conceived in the image and likeness of "European Culture," which also found in this ideology the justification of colonialism

(colonialism, understood as the only way through which the cultures of the present, situated in the epoch of savagery or barbarism, could reach, without the need for centuries or millennia to elapse, the superior stage of European civilization).

In the anthropological schools after "evolutionism," for example, in the functionalist schools (represented by Bronislaw Malinowski) and later, in some variables of structuralism (represented by Claude Levi-Strauss), cultural pluralism gradually slid towards a radical relativism: each cultural sphere would have its own internal structure (emic), which would be impossible to understand from the outside (etic). Therefore, with Levi-Strauss, it could be said: "Savage is he who calls another savage." In this way, cultural relativism began to be associated with a "modern spirit" (which some would interpret Pascalianly as an *esprit de finesse*), the spirit of understanding, of tolerance, of respect for the "other" and for his "sensitivity," which is opposed to the *esprit géométrique*, rigid, intolerant, "imperialist," blind to everything that does not presuppose universal evidence, above any individual or group sensitivity.

2. We are not Faced not with Alternatives, but with Disjunctions: The Trilemma.

The most serious aspect of the matter is that these three attitudes or philosophies of culture, which we designate as cultural monism ("ethnocentrism," for their adversaries), relativism and cultural pluralism, are not presented as mere alternatives, but as disjunctions among which we must choose. From where does the disjunctive disposition of these three ways of understanding the relations that cultural spheres can supposedly maintain among themselves derive?

Undoubtedly, in our opinion, from the very concept of "cultural sphere," understood as a relatively closed totality (a "complex whole," in the attributive sense), self-sufficient, without prejudice to the benefits and influences that it may receive from the remaining cultural spheres that constitute the distributive whole or totality of culture, understood as a cultural sphere. As a paradigm of the concept of "cultural sphere," in this sense, one could consider each of those "superorganisms" that Oswald Spengler precisely called "cultures."

However, perhaps the best way to show to what extent the scheme of cultural spheres is alive and active today, even among people who do not even use this denomination, is to analyze the expression "signs of identity," so often used by politicians, journalists, intellectuals or radio broadcasters to refer to what they consider "their own culture." Because the innocent formula—"signs of identity"—in reality only makes sense in terms of a presupposed cultural sphere; that is to say, of a sphere whose identity (of a

substantial nature) is presupposed, and of which the "sign of identity" considered would turn out to be a mere indication. Thus, the sardana would be a sign of identity of a supposed Catalan culture or cultural sphere, and the auresku would be a sign of identity of a supposed Basque culture or cultural sphere. What is equivalent to say that the importance, the meaning, the scope, etc., of the sardana (or that of the auresku) cannot be grasped by itself, not even by the similarities that it can maintain with institutions of other cultural spheres, but by what it has of revelation, indication or sign of a presupposed identity, which is applied precisely to the culture of reference, and not to the sign of identity in itself, in its material supposition.

Now, by placing the various cultural spheres on a plane of confrontation, in terms of value, consistency, dignity, originality, etc., it is possible to give a "logical reason" for the system of (disjunctive) alternatives that we have established; for this system has to do with the system of quantifiers of predicate logic, linked to the {1, 0} values of truth:

(1) Either we assert that, among the various cultural spheres of the distributive whole of cultures, only one cultural sphere can be considered as supporting authentic values; that is, that there is only one cultural sphere that deserves to be considered as authentic or true culture (the other cultural spheres would be reflections, de-generations, or mere appearances or phenomena of the "true culture").

(2) Or we affirm that all cultural spheres are of equal value, as cultures that find their meaning precisely in the concavity of their own sphere: "All cultures are equal," we read on a huge plaque installed in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

And this statement is developed in two other dichotomous versions (since equality does not imply connectedness):

(2A) "All cultures are equal," except in a regime of disjunction, of separation, even of "megaric" incommensurability (which can reach the situation of incompatibility). It is evident that the formula of this option is equivalent to the opposite formula: "All cultures are unequal," without being able to speak of logical contradiction, because the postulated equality refers in some cases to equality in dignity, in rights, etc., of the spheres that, however, are considered unequal in contents or in numerical or substantial identity.

(2B) "All cultures are equal," except without the need to presuppose between them a regime of separation; on the contrary, postulating the possibility and convenience of a coexistence or juxtaposition of men belonging to the various cultures (this was the scheme that Americo Castro used to describe the supposed coexistence, under Ferdinand III the Saint, of the three religions—Jews, Moors and Christians—which today it is customary to translate as the coexistence between "the three cultures").

Option (1) is that of cultural monism (which from the other options will be perceived as ethnocentrism); option (2A) is that of cultural relativism; and option (2B) is that of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism. It would seem that a choice must be made among these three options.

3. Critical Illustrations of each of the Members of the Trilemma

Cultural monism (practically ethnocentrism, if we leave aside, for the moment, the attempts to create a "universal culture" obtained by recasting all cultural spheres) is certainly, without needing to be called in this way, the most traditional perspective, without prejudice to the interpretations of Protagoras' principle of homomensura—"man is the measure of all things"—as a man shaped by each culture (in the sense of cultural relativism). However, cultural monism can be presented and "justified" from two quite different sources:

The first wants to remain in the realm of facts, i.e., outside of value judgments. If it is only possible to speak of one cultural sphere of reference, of which all the others were reflections or even degenerations, it is because all the cultural spheres that really exist on earth would have been originated by an original culture, and would be like pulsations of that mother culture, identified with the Egyptian culture. Such was, as is well known, the monistic vision of culture defended by the school of so-called radical diffusionism, of Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, or of William James Perry (*The Children of the Sun*, 1923).

The second does not hesitate to vindicate cultural monism, even ethnocentrism, but in the name, not of realities that are perhaps only demonstrated by science fiction, but in the name of values, no longer past but future, that are imposed from a given cultural sphere on those who identify with it. For Pericles or Plato, the values of the "paideia" (or Greek culture) were the only values that could oppose the barbarian peoples; for the Spaniards who entered America, Christian values (which were not only religious values, but also moral, ethical, ceremonial, political, artistic), were usually seen as the only

values that should prevail over the barbarian gods, inspired by the devil; for most Western scientists and engineers (and not only those of the positivist era), the values of "Western culture" (which include both scientific values and democratic values) are the only values that can be accepted and that must be offered to other peoples; within this same perspective Richard Rorty has recently defended the need to assume the "ethnocentric" position in everything that concerns the values of truth and other criteria proper to our culture.

Now then, cultural monism, as ethnocentrism, is difficult to defend today, and many of the arguments of relativism and multiculturalism can serve to reduce it to its fair limits. But neither do we consider cultural relativism defensible, insofar as it faces the evidence of the superiority of some "cultures" over others, in the technological, scientific and even political fields. What about the option of cultural integrationism? If it is interpreted as a mere coexistence or juxtaposition of different peoples or religions, it seems obvious to us that such an option is, in reality, empty, rather a wish, of an irenistic nature. It cannot be said that social groups with different cultures coexist, or that they coexist, even peacefully, unless some remain in their ghettos, in the face of those who hold the dominant positions. Effective integration will only be apparent (an integration by juxtaposition), until the social groups in the dominated position either reach dominant positions or get rid of their institutions incompatible with those of the host society. This is what happened with Moors, Jews and Christians in medieval Seville: the myth of coexistence put into circulation by Américo Castro is being challenged in our days (Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, Serafín Fanjul García).

4. The Myth of the Cultural Spheres as the Source of the Trilemma

But how could we reject each of the three options of the trilemma (monism, relativism, pluralism) without rejecting the trilemma itself? For it is evident that once we have accepted the trilemma (in our case, the bifurcated dilemma), we would have no choice but to embrace one of its options. It is evident that, once the trilemma has been accepted by a critic, if he rules out that the author he criticizes is a relativist or pluralist, he will have to launch against him the dreaded accusation of ethnocentrism.

It is therefore a question, for my part, of going back further behind the trilemma, that is to say, it is a question of denouncing the assumption on which the trilemma is running at full speed in our days, without journalists, intellectuals, politicians and radio broadcasters, but also historians, sociologists and anthropologists, being aware of it.

And this assumption is that of cultural spheres, understood as substantive entities that offer the researcher very diverse "signs of identity" of their substance (of what else?); of a substance that is supposed to come from the most arcane times and that pretends to maintain its identity, considered as the supreme and sacred value. But there are no cultural spheres in that sense. Cultural spheres are only ideological constructions, purely and simply myths.

This will allow us to add a fourth option to the system of the three options, (1) (2A) (2B), which we have established on the basis of the assumption of cultural spheres: that not one or all cultural spheres can be taken as subjects or supports of value, not one.

And if there are no cultural spheres as entities endowed with a substantive identity (idiographic, numerical, delimited in the distributive whole), then the options, or the very concepts of ethnocentrism, cultural relativism and pluralism of cultural spheres dissolve. Cultural spheres are not entities endowed with a substantial identity of their own; at most, they are phenomenal entities, delimited perhaps over the centuries (when not invented ad hoc by groups, peoples or nations in search of a state), by isolation from other phenomenal spheres, or by a mixture of some of them. And by this we mean that the diagnoses (or accusations) of ethnocentrism, relativism or pluralism, are impossible diagnoses or accusations, if we keep to a scientific or philosophical terrain. They are diagnoses or accusations that can only be maintained in the doxographical terrain of confused and obscure opinions about the ideological nebulae that are formed at a given juncture. Can possession or diabolical obsession be admitted, in the scientific terrain, as a psychological or psychiatric diagnosis? But, according to our thesis, the diagnosis of ethnocentrism or relativism, in the field of anthropology, does not go further than the diagnosis of diabolical possession or diabolical obsession, in the field of psychiatry.

5. Reduction of Substantive Cultural Spheres to Phenomenal Cultural Spheres.

There are no cultural spheres endowed with a substantive identity. These spheres only have a phenomenal identity, enough to begin to organize the relevant ethnographic and ethnological descriptions.

Phenomenal identities, because their unity is resolved in a system, conglomerate or concatenation, whether of cultural traits (patterns, institutions, elements) but also natural (racial, for example) or tertio-genic (such as the Pythagorean relations of the right triangle, which are neither natural nor cultural, and this is said in the face of dualists who continue to consider as a fundamental principle that

of the distinction in the Universe between Nature and Culture, perhaps a last pulsation of the ancient distinction between Matter and Spirit).

Now then, the reduction of cultural spheres, endowed with substantial identity, to the condition of cultural spheres endowed with phenomenal unity, should not be confused with the reduction of the theory of cultural spheres to one of the aggregationist theories of culture (to the theory of cultural mosaics, for example). The key to the latter theories can be found in a process of "substantivation of the parts" (of traits, patterns, elements) confronted with the process of "substantivation of the complex whole" that leads to the substantive cultural sphere.

But the substantivization of the parts would also be gratuitous—a cultural sphere is not the result of the aggregation of supposedly pre-existing cultural elements (which some call memes). Cultural elements or features are figures that are shaped from the phenomenal totalities themselves, and precisely at the moment when these are decomposed or broken down into formal parts in the very process of cultural shock. Nor did eyes, or foreheads, as Empedocles thought, pre-exist the animals that could have been formed from the union of those "solitary limbs" that would have given rise, first, to hideous monsters that adaptation to the environment would have had to polish little by little. A femur bone does not precede the vertebrate organism; but once formed it can be extracted from the animal, becoming a figure, element, value or countervalue of the organic factory. The elements, traits, cultural institutions—are not prior to the phenomenal cultural spheres, but can be taken apart, transported and incorporated, with eventual deformations, into other cultural spheres, either as elements with the capacity of integration with other parts of their own, or as elements with the capacity to dissolve the phenomenal whole constituted by a given cultural sphere. And all this without prejudice to the fact that the incorporation of an element or trait from a given cultural sphere into another is not always "clean," since it will almost always drag along other elements, splinters or traits from the cultural sphere of origin.

6. There is no Conflict of Cultures, but neither is there Integration of Cultures or Cultural Relativism.

According to what we have said, therefore, it is not possible to speak of conflicts of cultures, or of conflicts of civilizations; nor is it possible to speak of integration or expansion of cultures. All these expressions would have to be restated in terms of conflicts of cultural elements, or of integration, or of diffusion of cultural elements or traits. Therefore, whoever considers a cultural element (let us take the democratic system, for example) as universal cannot be accused of ethnocentrism. Even less can

anyone be accused of ethnocentrism (or of cultural monism) who recognizes and defends the universality of the Pythagorean theorem, as a detached element, no longer of Greek culture, but of all culture, as a structure valid for all cultures, above any relativism.

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Gustavo Bueno Martínez (1924-2016) was a foremost Spanish philosopher who has had a deep influence among thinkers of tradition. This article comes courtesy of [El Catoblepas](#).

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