Encyclopedia of SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1

Vincent N. Parrillo
William Paterson University
Editor

SAGE
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore
A SAGE Reference Publication

a foreign concept to Samoans. A woman alone was viewed as a taboo presence. Once discovering this belief, Kingsley proved able to circumvent the problem. When she needed to travel, she would tell the Samoans that she was looking for her husband and point in the direction she wished to travel. By presenting herself as a married woman wishing to reunite with her spouse, she conformed to the social structure established by the Samoan language. With Samoans now happy to facilitate her reunion, Kingsley regained her ability to move throughout the country.

Demographer David Helin notes that failing to consider the relative nature of culture can prove costly. Many American businesses have learned this lesson the hard way. For example, ethnocentrism blinded General Motors to the reasons behind the poor international sales of its Chevrolet Nova. Within Spanish-speaking nations, the automobile's name *Nova* translated to the phrase "No Go." A similar disaster befell American chicken mogul Frank Purdue. While his slogan "It Takes a Tough Man to Make a Tender Chicken" enjoyed success in the United States, when translated to Spanish, Purdue's slogan became "A Sexually Excited Man Will Make a Chicken Affectionate." With these examples, we learn the importance of avoiding simple translation of one's ideas to cultures with different meaning systems.

The Moral Debate

The objectivity to which cultural relativists aspire is admirable for some. Yet, many feel that the method introduces problems of its own. For example, Robert Edgerton asks, If practices such as cannibalism, infanticide, genital mutilation, genocide, and suicide bombings are normative to a particular cultural context, does that make them right? The cultural relativist position, taken to its extreme, would frame events such as the Holocaust, the 9/11 attacks, torture at Abu Ghraib, and ethnic cleansing in Darfur as normative to the cultures from which they emerge and, thus, morally justifiable. Edgerton supports the notion of objective evaluation. But he also argues that once such data are gathered, researchers must carefully review their findings. If a culture's values, beliefs, and behaviors are different yet beneficial and adaptive, then they must be respected. But according to Edgerton's point of view, if values, beliefs, and behaviors endanger people's health, happiness, or survival, ranking cultures in terms of their moral health becomes necessary.

Karen Cerulo

See also Cultural Values; Ethnocentrism; Relative Deprivation

Further Readings

Benedict, Ruth. 1934. *Patterns of Culture.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Boas, Franz. [1940] 1982. *Race, Language and Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Edgarton, Robert. 1992. *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony.* New York: Free Press.

Helin, David W. 1992. "When Slogans Go Wrong." *American Demographics* 14(2):14.

Cultural Values

The notion of "cultural values" brings together two powerful social science concepts to produce a concept that is seductive yet slippery and contentious. It is seductive in that it purports to explain or interpret human behavior, especially differences in behavior between groups, through an emphasis on how human lives are also differently valued moral lives. It accomplishes this through deploying the concept of value as that which makes people conceive of what is right, beautiful, and good and, hence, what is desirable. Thus, groups with behavioral differences are viewed as different because of differing values or cultural values. The concept of value becomes further sharpened by distinguishing the desirable from the desired; the former is based on a strong notion of moral justification, whereas the latter restrictively refers to nothing more than a preference. Such an emphasis on value as valuable for the understanding of social action assures a critical space for cultural approaches to human behavior as distinct from conventional sociological, political, and economic approaches, which emphasize social institutions, social relations, power, and market or nonmarket commodity transactions.

Nevertheless, the carefully crafted notion of value, when qualified as cultural value, quickly becomes slippery and contentious when used uncritically. Whereas intense debate over the precise scope,

meaning, and valence of the concept "culture," especially within the discipline of anthropology and the sociology of culture, makes its users mindful of overstating its explanatory value, the same cannot be said for the concept "cultural value." While debate over cultural values usefully seeks to distinguish between moral evaluation and factual cognition, or between the desirable and the desired, seldom does one encounter questions as to whether and how values relate to structures of power. For example, can one indeed separate a cultural value from, say, a political value? Those knowledgeable in social and anthropological thought have pointed out that to value is to introduce hierarchy. Hence, values are very much political, concerned with the organization of power and inequality by definition. In what sense, then, can a value be cultural? In other words, the problem with the concept "cultural values" is not that people do not operate with values that influence their actions, but rather that it is difficult to demonstrate what exactly is a cultural value, and hence it is intellectually misleading to assume that this is self-evident. That such fundamental distinctions are not clear in the use of the term is not due to an oversight in the development of the concept but is more a result of overstating the case for cultural values by treating the concept "cultural" uncritically. Consequently, it fatally leaves open fundamental questions about its own explanatory or interpretive validity.

Even a cursory appreciation of the debates around culture (taking this to be somewhat more problematic than the use of the term *value* by itself) ought to, at least minimally, caution us against using the term *cultural values* easily. This entry first delineates the development of the concept "culture," then highlights examples of how cultural values frame popular discourses on social problems, and finally poses the problem of human rights as an example of how cultural values may not be the best way to look at social problems. Throughout this entry, the term *cultural values* is viewed as problematic.

Culture has surely earned its place among the most difficult terms in history. Etymologically related to the sense of *cultivate* as in *agri-culture*, this early sense of culture denoted an activity, a production (one needs to work on cultivation), and simultaneously a product or set of products—the cultivated or cultured artifacts. However, this dual sense was gradually repressed over the following 2 centuries as 18th- and 19th-century European theorists of the cultural "Other" emphasized only the sense of culture as product. Culture came to be viewed as a kind of property that humans possessed (or not) and in varying degrees. It is crucial to note that these latter theorizations were intimately associated with the experience of Europeans with colonialism in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and the emergence of new forms of class divisions and patriarchy within European societies.

This classic notion of culture, most clearly represented by the 19th-century English literary critic Mathew Arnold, held that culture referred to the best achievements and thoughts of humans, in short the set of perfect values or perfection itself that emerged from a people. This, of course, left the issue of who decides what is perfection or what is the best of values relatively unexamined, leading to a notion of "high culture" and its obverse, "low culture," that proved useful for the civilizing mission of colonialism as well as for the ruling elites in any society. Culture, in the Arnoldian sense, was then viewed as "property of the few," as some people were deemed to have more of it than others, and a large number of wretched were thought not to have any of it at all. Notions of "savage" and "barbarian" as the opposite of "civilized" were strengthened in this view of culture. More generally, culture came to mean the finer products of any group, specifically referring to the products in the realm of ruling-class understandings of art, music, literature, dance, poetry, sculpture, and so on.

It was in this classic context that some anthropologists explicitly developed another notion of culture as distinct from the elitist notions of culture. At least three breaks (or waves) can be identified over the next century or so. The first break in the mid-19th century was symbolized by the Tylorian view of *culture* as an all-inclusive term for all human beliefs and behavior that are learned rather than inherited biologically. Culture in this sense was an entire way of life—beliefs, practices, ideals, norms, and values that spanned the economic, political, kinship, religious, and aesthetics. One still possessed culture, and hence culture was still viewed as property, except that culture was now considered as a property of all. All have culture, albeit of different kinds. Such a notion of culture as an entire way of life contained an evolutionary sense, as now there were "primitive" cultures and advanced ones—qualitative evaluation rather than a quantitative measure. This sense of culture was further developed in a nonevolutionary direction by the Boasian anthropological enterprise, which seriously

built up "scientific" ways to study different cultures. Notably, the Boasian sense of cultures, in the plural, assumed cultural difference along the same racial lines it was designed to refute, leading to a problem of the culturalization of race, wherein culture comes to play the same classificatory function as the now scientifically dubious notion of race played. Thus, what distinguishes one race or ethnicity or nationality from another is its purported culture, and also, what distinguishes one culture from another is its different race, ethnicity, or nationality. This problematic with the Boasian notion of culture continues despite the fact that it strenuously distinguished biological ideas of race from culture.

A second break from the classical view of culture distinguished the *cultural* from other aspects of life. Culture acquired its own experiential and analytical sharpness, and this move was akin to the earlier Durkheimian carving out of a special space for "the social." This break was best exemplified by Clifford Geertz, who used culture to refer to those human activities specifically engaged with meaning construction via symbols. According to Geertz, humans are suspended in a web of meaning that we have spun ourselves, and this web is culture. The Geertzian turn made it possible for culture (in the singular) to be viewed widely not as a property that one has or not, but as an aspect of living, an ordinary condition of being for all humans. We thus have two different notions—cultures and culture. The former refers to groups that are culturally different, whereas the latter refers to an aspect of how all humans live.

Although the Geertzian understanding of culture succeeds brilliantly in demarcating a distinct realm of culture as concerned with meaning, it failed to answer some questions. Whose web was it? Who makes the web? Do all people who are suspended in it contribute equally to its production? Most important, Geertz's view was critiqued for not taking into account the—fact that culture was not only a product—the web—or a production—the weaving of the web but actually a struggle or a contest over production. In other words, the Geertzian emphasis on culture as shared unfortunately masked the fact of power, as culture is not simply shared by all within its boundaries but is actually a dynamic site of contestation over meanings including the question of cultural group boundaries. Consequently, over the past 2 decades, we have seen a third break from the classical view of culture that has now made the notion of different cultures itself problematic.

In this third break, a culture is no longer assumed to be a group that shares a cultural way of life. Instead, culture (the activity) and culture (the group) are viewed as constituted by power (struggles over meaning making), thus making margins and borders between cultures blurred or contested, highlighting interstitial spaces, making the hybrid into the normal condition of being, and turning the focus of anthropologists to the process of Othering rather than simply the study of the already existing Other. It is now a "normal" anthropology (in the Kuhnian sense) that speaks of the production of the Self and the Other and hence views culture itself as a production of, among other things, difference. Difference is thus historicized and shown as both constitutive of and constituted by group formation and identities in such a discourse of culture. An example of such a use of the term *culture* is that of the Mexican anthropologist Nestor Garcia Canclini, who views culture as the social production of meaning through symbolic (semiotic) representation of material structures to understand, reform, and transform the social system. Culture is thus a dynamic concept that reminds us that claims of tradition are always constructed through sites of power and struggle over meanings.

Returning to the concept of "cultural values," we see that this concept is used popularly as an explanatory device for a wide range of social problems, such as poverty, modernization, ethnic and religious conflict, gender and racial inequality, and, most recently, democratization. Despite being roundly critiqued for their scholarly content, many theses based on cultural values abound in the popular imagination. Examples of such theses include the Huntington thesis, or the clash of civilizations thesis, which invokes cultural values in the guise of civilizational units to explain all kinds of conflict on a world scale; the culture of poverty thesis, which holds the value-based actions and decision-making behavior of the poor as explanations for their poverty; the modernization thesis, which identifies "backward," or the more euphemistically termed *traditional*, values of people in developing countries as the shackles that prevent them from enjoying the fruits of modernization and modernity; and the endless discussions on gender and racial differences that, while taking care not to seemingly biologize gender or naturalize race, actually come very close to doing so by speaking in particular ways of the essentially different values embraced by men and women, or by members of so-called different and

hence separate races. The most dubious and pernicious misuse of the concept is in the debates over family values, where no awareness seemingly exists about the constructed nature of any such claims. It all seems to naturally flow from an unspecified human nature that is insidiously raced, classed, and gendered.

None of these uses of the term *cultural values* take account of the intellectual backdrop of the term *culture* discussed earlier in this entry. The term *cultural* in the notion "cultural value" operates in two senses—as an aspect of life (connected with production of meanings) and as a reference to the basis of group difference. In this discourse of cultural values, each group is assumed to share a cultural way of being or values, and groups are differentiated from each other purportedly on the basis of these given values. Both of these are problematic assumptions. In other words, cultural values, by definition, are never universal. They are always particular because they are associated with groups of people who supposedly operate as a group because they share cultural values.

Such a formulation of the self-evident existence of cultural groups (based on different cultural values) has led to intense debates over the claim to cultural rights, especially in the context of more universalizing human rights. This debate is crucial in an era of globalization where borders seem to be crossed with impunity by flows of finance, goods, services, and images, even as they are newly (re)erected as barriers to the flow of people viewed as cultural Others and the diversity of interpretations of what it means to be democratic. In such a context, social problems such as child labor or female genital mutilation get to be viewed too easily as differences of cultural values of cultural groups. The dual pitfalls of ethnocentrism or plain bigotry, and its obverse of cultural relativism, both share the assumption that these problems are indeed manifestations of cultural values as opposed to sociopolitical and economic problems. While the former position condemns such practices based on a racist and bigoted prejudging of all cultures different from one's own, the latter position majestically refuses to condemn even those practices that oppressed members within any cultural group struggle against. The result is that particular groups are assumed to be the cultural Others of a panoptic Self that only observes and is never observed. Both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism share dubious assumptions about culture and social problems. Both of them are incapable of implicating the Self in the degradation of the Other. While one is triumphalist in proclaiming its own superiority, the other is many times a weak call for viewing all practices with equanimity and ultimately runs into both ethical and logical problems.

Alternative approaches call for understanding such social problems as the effects of historically constructed and contingent struggles over meanings and material control of economic, political, and legal conditions of existence of culturally hybrid groups. The problem then becomes one of viewing cultural values as serious and discursive claims rather than actually existing facts of social life. Consequently, the task becomes one of evaluating claims to cultural rights in the context of how group norms are shaped in complex ways by power differentials within and between groups, and how dispositions to act are cultivated among individuals experiencing power and values in ways that are difficult to separate in the din of everyday life.

Balmurli Natrajan

See also Cultural Relativism; Culture of Poverty; Culture Wars; Ethnocentrism; Postmodernism; Power; Values

Further Readings

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. "Writing against Culture." Pp. 137–62 in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by R. G. Fox. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Boggs, James. 2004. "The Culture Concept as Theory, in Context." *Current Anthropology* 45(2):187–209.

Cowan, Jane K., Marie-Benedicte Dembour, and Richard A. Wilson, eds. 2001. *Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." Pp. 3–30 in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays.* New York: Basic Books.

Markus, Gyorgy. 1993. "Culture: The Making and the Make-up of a Concept (An Essay in Historical Semantics)." *Dialectical Anthropology* 18:3–29.

Roseberry, William. 1994. "Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology." Pp. 17–29 in *Anthropologies and Histories.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sewell, William. 1999. "The Concept(s) of Culture." Pp. 35–61 in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture,* edited by V. E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Sökefeld, Martin. 1999. "Debating Self, Identity, and Culture in Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 40:417–47.

Visweswaran, Kamala. 1998. "Race and the Culture of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 100:70–83.

Wilson, R. 1997. "Human Rights, Culture and Context: An Introduction." Pp. 1–27 in *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by R. Wilson. London: Pluto.

Culture of Dependency

A culture of dependency is defined as a type of culture that relies upon, and comes to expect, state benefits and other support to maintain it. Overall the usage is best related to the neoconservative supply-side view of welfare in the 1990s. The argument of a culture of dependency assumes the position that entitlements lead to poverty by reducing the work ethic and regenerating dependency on state benefits. Following the lead of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, political attacks on a culture of dependency in Europe's social democratic states began with Tony Blair in Great Britain and Gerhard Schröder in Germany in the 1990s.

In the United States, policies reducing welfare payouts by the Ronald Reagan administration and, later, Bill Clinton's welfare reform bill of 1996, titled Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), were predicated on the concept of changing a culture of dependency. Along with TANF, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed to reduce welfare dependency and encourage work. The policies required individuals to become "job ready" and work to be eligible for welfare benefits. Between 1996 and 2002 there were 4.7 million fewer welfare-dependent Americans as defined by having 50 percent or more of a family's income coming from TANF, food stamps, or Supplemental Social Insurance. The U.S. welfare reform laws also limit cash awards to 5 years.

The attack on welfare and a culture of dependency occurred as Western countries moved toward neoliberalism, fiscal conservatism, and free-market strategies. Along with attempts at reducing the size of government in Western nations came an emphasis on decentralization and deregulation. The 1994 conservative U.S. Congress played a key role in the philosophy of welfare reform and the attack on the idea of a culture of dependency. The policies of workfare were a result of this critique of dependency culture.

Welfare Reform and the Third Way

The culture of dependency argument holds that chronic low income among entitlement recipients results from welfare benefits and not personal inadequacies. The generosity of the welfare state reduces self-reliance and responsibility. The main ideas of this perspective originated with the concept of a culture of poverty argument in the 1960s, along with debates on the existence of an underclass in the 1980s. Both held that poverty in third world countries and poor communities in developed countries rested on a set of behaviors learned inside those poor communities. The culture of dependency argument draws on historical attacks on welfare, with a central focus on the undeserving poor and abuse of entitlements. According to advocates of the culture of dependency argument, welfare reduces the will of individuals to work. Other aspects of the argument are that welfare causes a decline in family values linked to child illegitimacy and a rise in the number of single-parent families. The assumption is that, when faced with opportunity, individuals with entitlements will not work if it requires too much effort to secure a small rise in income.

Social theorists identify a culture of dependency with other social problems, including family breakdown, addiction, and educational failure. Those critical of socialist welfare states and entitlements make the argument that the welfare state leads to passive actors and inhibits enterprise among dependents. The welfare reforms of the 1990s thus evolved with ideas of creating a new contract making recipients accountable, while using market solutions to end poverty. Supporters of the doctrine of the Third Way argue for a smaller role for the state, while emphasizing accountability and personal responsibility. They argue for a stakeholder approach to entitlements where the state does not guarantee long-term support. In Australia and New Zealand, social reforms also led to critical responses to the welfare state and the culture of dependency.

Critics of the Culture of Dependency Argument

Critics of this stance argue that welfare has not created dependency as much as it has produced an isolated population with few options. They point to