Culture and Rights

Anthropological Perspectives

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6   Between universalism and relativism: a critique of the UNESCO concept of culture

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Introduction

In a scathing attack on the classic Herderian–Boasian concept of culture and its potential for generating both relativism and chauvinism, Alain Finkielkraut (1987) notes that although the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was initially founded in an Enlightenment spirit loyal to the universalist legacy of Diderot and Condorcet, it almost immediately degenerated into a tool for parochialism and relativism. Uninhibited by the possible constraints implied by detailed knowledge regarding the topics under scrutiny, Finkielkraut was able to present a powerful, coherent and, in many people's view, persuasive criticism of the widespread culturalization of politics and aesthetics in the late twentieth century. Arguing that the meaning of culture has slid from *Bildung*[1] to heritage, from universalistic thought to relativistic anti-thought, his book on 'the defeat of thinking'[2] has been widely read and translated over the past decade.

In Finkielkraut's book, UNESCO is given a central role as a chief villain (along with social anthropologists, those dangerous purveyors of relativist nonsense). In this chapter, UNESCO's ideology of culture will serve as a point of departure, engaging current debates over culture and rights with the most recent and most comprehensive statement from UNESCO regarding culture in the contemporary world, namely the report on *Our Creative Diversity* (World Commission on Culture and Development 1995), a document which heroically and often skillfully attempts to manoeuvre in the muddy waters between the Scylla of nihilistic cultural relativism and the Charybdis of supremacist universalism. Fuzzier, less elegant and less consistent than liberal critiques of the Finkielkraut type, *Our Creative Diversity*, in spite of important shortcomings, is nonetheless more complex, presenting a multifaceted picture of the social world. While liberal critics frame the problem as being one of 'rights versus culture' (see the editors' introduction to this volume), the 'right *to* culture' is a stronger concern in UNESCO.

However, the authors do not explicitly address the possible contradiction between the two approaches. Nor do they see rights as culture: although they emphasize the value of cultural diversity, it appears largely as an aesthetic, rather than a moral, value.

An intriguing and ultimately disquieting context for the UNESCO model of culture is the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss on cultural relativity and culture contact, which, although peripheral to his structuralist *œuvre*, has been influential in UNESCO. The vision expressed in Lévi-Strauss' programmatic work on cultural diversity illustrates some of the difficulties inherent in *Our Creative Diversity*. The two pieces commissioned by UNESCO from Lévi-Strauss, *Race et Histoire* (Lévi-Strauss 1971 [1952]) and *Race et Culture* (Lévi-Strauss 1979 [1971]) highlight some of the dilemmas associated with a partition of the world into cultures. Central insights from these works can also be invoked against over-optimistic suppositions from scholars such as Finkielkraut that specific local circumstances and politics can be effectively divorced.

These problems recur: (Plato's Socrates, for one, discussed them with his contemporary relativists, Gorgias and Protagoras). These days frequently framed as communitarianism versus liberalism, or relativism versus universalism, there are some real baby-and-bathwater problems which can doubtless be dealt with eloquently and effectively, but not comprehensively, from an unreformed Enlightenment, cosmopolitan point of view. A discussion of these problems forms the substance of this contribution.

Our creative diversity

UNESCO has, since its foundation in 1945, planned and implemented a vast number of developmental and cooperative projects concerning education in a wide sense.[3] Cultural creativity, cultural rights and ethnic/racial discrimination have also been important concerns since the beginning – leading, *inter alia*, to its famous list of world cultural heritage sites, which recently expanded to include 'natural heritage sites' as well. Many writings supported or published by UNESCO have, over the past five decades, made important contributions to international debates about racism, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, cultural hegemonies and quests for equal cultural rights. Although this body of work certainly has an applied perspective in common, it cannot be maintained that all, or even nearly all, the writings published under the aegis of UNESCO share a common perspective on culture, relativism and rights, despite Finkielkraut's insinuations.[4] A few publications nevertheless stand out as implicit or explicit policy documents. The most

important example of the latter is clearly the report *Our Creative Diversity* (UNESCO 1995). Written by a characteristically global and interdisciplinary group,[5] the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD), the report was published simultaneously in several languages and later translated into yet others (thirteen at the latest count). This report seems a particularly fruitful starting point for a discussion of the global debates regarding cultural and political rights. It is a genuine intellectual contribution to the field. It can be read symptomatically as an expression of a certain 'UNESCO ideology'; its omissions are as interesting as the points it makes; it highlights – voluntarily and involuntarily – deep predicaments of culture; and last, but perhaps not least, being what it is, it will, by default, have real-world consequences of a magnitude most academics can only dream of for their scholarly work.

Like the UN report on the environment, *Our Common Future* (World Commission on the Environment 1987), *Our Creative Diversity* was a long time in the making. It was an expensive, prestigious and cumbersome project[6] and yet it has received comparatively little attention outside UNESCO's immediate sphere of influence. The reason may be that the Brundtland report was politically easier to relate to with great popular demand for its central concept – sustainable development – which elegantly embodied and concealed a kind of double-think characteristic of this risk-aware age of global capitalism. It presented a consistent description of the world and offered predictable and concrete policy advice of the kind heard from hundreds of environmentalist lobbyists for decades, including that provided by *Limits to Growth* the famous report of the Club of Rome (Meadows *et al.* 1974) completed a decade and a half earlier. The Brundtland report's analyses and advice were thus consistent with much of the Romantic and green autocriticism that has been inherent in modernity at least since William Blake's day. The more recent UNESCO report, by contrast, offers little by way of actual policy recommendations. It is difficult to summarize; it introduces issues that demand real intellectual engagement – and not merely the reiteration of pre-existing conceptions – to be properly understood; and finally, it must in all justice be said, it requires a considerable talent for double- and triple-think to see it as a coherent piece of work.

Reading *Our Creative Diversity* soon after it was published, I was, like many other social anthropologists, curious to discover how it related to the current academic debates over the use and misuse of concepts of culture and, in a more political vein, the still vigorous debates regarding the relationship between individual, group and state in the contemporary, post-Cold War world. These involved quibbles over multicultur-

alism in North America; philosophical exchanges between communitarians and liberals, moderns and postmoderns on both sides of the Atlantic and Franco-German faultlines; disagreements over the relationship between cultural rights and equal rights among immigrants in Western Europe; nationalist essentialism 'with no head' versus marketplace liberalism 'with no heart'; consumerism and identity; globalization and localization. Now, as will be evident from the critique below, the report is sensitive almost to the point of hypochondria regarding the concept of culture (which does not preclude some interesting self-contradictions). Yet identity politics hardly figures at all in the report as a topic. This omission is symptomatic of the report's shortcomings.

A very brief summary of the report's general conclusions – which are based on the statistics, anecdotal evidence, informed reasoning and humanistic ideology featured throughout – might read like this: although global cultural variation is a fact, it is necessary to develop a common global ethics, which should draw on values most religions have in common as a starting-point. Notably, respect and tolerance must be emphasized as central values. The world is culturally diverse, and it is necessary to pursue political models which maintain and encourage this diversity. Such variation functions creatively both because it stimulates the members of a culture to be creative, and because it offers impulses to others. Equality between men and women is essential, and children and adolescents must be given the opportunity to realize their creative potential on their own terms. Modern mass media must be used to strengthen local culture, not to weaken it. The cultural heritage must also be respected – and this should be taken to mean not only one's own but also the heritage of others. Ethnic and linguistic minorities, in particular, need protection, and have the right to retain their cultural uniqueness.

While these conclusions are so generally phrased that they may seem palatable to both moderate communitarians and moderate liberals, they, and the report as a whole, gloss over fundamental problems and fail to address politically volatile issues. This shortcoming, of course, makes the report less useful than it could have been. I shall deal with the most serious problems at some length, but in all fairness it should be added that some of them cannot be resolved once and for all in political practice, which is bound to tread the muddy middle ground of compromise.

Two problems of culture

The report is characterized by indecision regarding the use of the concept of culture. There are two separate problems here. The first,

typical of work emanating from the UN Decade for Culture, concerns the relationship between culture as artistic work and culture as a way of life. At the outset of the report, Marshall Sahlins is quoted approvingly for spelling out the classic anthropological view that every human activity, including those relating to development and the economy, has a cultural component or dimension. As a result, the report periodically reads as a catalogue of human activities. There is a nevertheless strong and slightly unsettling bias in this regard towards looking at culture as *difference*: as those symbolic acts which demarcate boundaries between groups. If culture is a way of life, then buying groceries at 7-eleven is naturally neither less nor more cultural than taking part in Tudor revivalism or teaching English history; working in a large factory or software company is no less authentic than tilling the soil or producing local crafts for tourists and anti-tourists, and so on. Being exotic or different in the eyes of the 'we' of *our* creative diversity does not qualify for being 'cultural' in an analytic sense. Besides, the penchant for locally rooted solutions in the sections dealing with development is both mysterious and empirically misleading: it has largely been through the appropriation and local adaptation of imported technologies and imported forms of organization that poor countries have become richer during the past century. In other words, even the ostensible strengthening of local culture is irretrievably a hybrid activity as it draws on organizational and technological resources of modernity.

The second definition of culture – culture seen as artistic production – is also amply represented in the report, and little effort is made to distinguish between the two perspectives. This kind of inconsistency is, perhaps, *gefundenes Fressen*[7] to many a nitpicking anthropologist, but in my view it does little harm. It may be noted as a problem, however, that the examples of artistic production mentioned in the report, like the examples taken from everyday life, highlight the uniqueness of the local, the rootedness of cultural activity and the differences between 'ours' and 'theirs'.

The second problem related to the concept of culture in the report is more serious than the exoticist bias. In most of the report, culture is conceptualized as something that can easily be pluralized, which belongs to a particular group of people, associated with their heritage or 'roots'. On the other hand, the authors are also keen to emphasize that 'impulses', external influence, globalization and creolization are also cultural phenomena. This duality corresponds to two sets of concepts of culture prevalent in contemporary anthropology, the first characteristic of cultural relativism, structural functionalism and structuralism, the

second typical of deconstructivist trends, as well as recent 'post-structuralist' work, taking the framework of cultural globalization as a starting-point for what are often comparative studies of modernities.

Culture is primarily seen as tradition by the WCCD, but a secondary meaning allows communication to be defined as cultural as well. The result is analytically unsatisfactory, but it does not necessarily entail an empirically wrong description. Culture can be understood simultaneously as tradition *and* communication; as roots, destiny, history, continuity and sharing on the one hand, and as impulses, choice, the future, change and variation on the other. The WCCD has laudably tried to incorporate both dimensions, but it remains a fact that the latter 'post-structuralist' perspective so typical of contemporary anthropological theorizing becomes a garnish, an afterthought, a refreshment to accompany the main course of cultures seen as bounded entities comprising 'groups' that share basic values and customs.

Since Lourdes Arizpe, writing on behalf of UNESCO, recently (1998) expressed incredulity in response to a similar criticism from Susan Wright (1998), I will highlight a few quotations from the report to substantiate this claim, which is an important premise for the rest of this piece. In Chapter 2, programmatically entitled 'No culture is an island', the authors write about 'respect for all cultures, or at least for those cultures that value tolerance and respect for others' (p. 54). As if cultures were social agents; pluralism is defined as 'tolerance and respect for and rejoicing over the plurality of cultures' (p. 55); on minorities, the authors say that '[t]hese groups share systems of values and sources of self-esteem that often are derived from sources quite different from those of the majority culture' (p. 57); and in the subsequent chapter, the authors write that 'most societies today are multicultural' (p. 61), meaning that they contain several cultures, implicitly assumed to be bounded. Throughout the report, cultures are implicitly and explicitly seen as rooted and old, shared within a group, to be treated 'with respect' as one handles aging china or old aunts with due attention to their fragility. (Like so many elite accounts of culture tinged with Romanticism, this report does not explicitly recognize the cultural dimension of mainstream or modern phenomena such as urban middle-class English culture, the culture of New York or Bombay, or the culture of contemporary Germans or the French etc.) Although it is said explicitly that any culture's relationship with the outside world is 'dynamic', UNESCO cultures remain islands or at least peninsulas.[8]

Global ethics and identity politics

This perspective has more to recommend it than many devastating, but often ahistorical, recent critiques from cultural studies and anthropology have been willing to admit. For decades, anthropologists have urged development agencies to take the cultural dimension into account, to become more sensitive towards local conditions and to understand that successful development processes necessarily take local conditions and local human resources seriously as factors of change. The report gives legitimacy to such a time-honoured anthropological view. However, the insistence on cultural difference and plurality as constitutive of the social world does not fit very well with the equally strong insistence on the need for a global ethics. Obviously, the WCCD wants to eat its cake and have it too; it promotes a relativistic view of development and a universalist view of ethics. Distancing itself occasionally from the 'vocal bullies' of identity politics and the mono-ethnic model of the nation-state, it does not, however, discuss the obvious contradictions between cultural relativism and ethical universalism, or the perils of identity politics at the sub-national level. While the Commission may defend itself successfully against academic charges of superficiality and dated-ness[9] by pointing out that the target group consists of ordinary educated people, not specialized and parochial scholars engaged in games of intellectual one-upmanship, the political innocence evident in the report is nothing short of stunning. In an age when nearly all armed conflicts take place within and not between states (see SIPRI 1997), and most of them could be designated as 'ethnic'; in an age when Croatian newspapers write about their successful national football team (during the 1998 World Cup) that it is genetically determined to win when notions of collective cultural rights and fear of foreign contamination direct anti-liberal or anti-secular political efforts in contexts otherwise as different as Le Pen's France, the BJP's India (or Hindustan) and the Algeria of the FIS, issues relating to cultural rights ought not to be treated lightly by a policy-oriented body such as UNESCO. To simply state, as the report does in many places and in different ways, that one is favourable to cultural rights simply will not do, whether the context is an academic one or a political one. The notion has to be circumscribed more carefully. It is not self-evident what the term means, nor how it articulates with individual human rights. The programmatic 'right to culture' may conflict with considerations of 'rights versus culture'.

The rise of identity politics at the turn of the millennium is not caused by a widespread and contagious lack of tolerance to be mitigated by the implementation of a global ethics. Rather, it draws legitimacy from a

Romantic way of thinking about difference and similarity, which the UNESCO report, in spite of its humanitarian intentions, may involuntarily contribute to perpetuating. The political conclusions to be drawn from the description of the world inherent in the report are not necessarily the liberal, tolerant and universalistic ones suggested by the authors (and here, at least, one must approve of Finkielkraut's unreformed Enlightenment universalism-cum-provincialism). Separatists, difference multiculturalists championing exclusive criteria of judgement for 'my culture', nationalists seeking stricter border controls and restrictions on the flows of meaning across boundaries, inquisitors chasing the Salman Rushdies of the world into hiding, and myriad nationalisms writ small could find a sound basis for their isolationism and political particularism in the report, notwithstanding its periodical assertions to the contrary. These assertions stand in a mechanical, external relationship to the basic view of cultures as bounded and unique. Cultures need to talk to each other, as it were, and tolerate but they remain bounded cultures nonetheless.

Probably, as Klausen (1998) remarks in a comment on the report, it would have been both better and more credible if the internal tensions and disagreements within the committee had been made explicit. In that case, one might have explored the strengths and weaknesses of the two positions (rights *above* culture and the right *to* culture), and it would have been evident that one cannot always have one's cake and eat it too.

Hybrids, traditions, culturalism and modernity

Let me sum up the argument so far. *Our Creative Diversity* invokes several concepts of culture, but it is dominated by the classic view from cultural relativism – '1930s social anthropology', Wright (1998:13) calls it dismissively – of cultures as bounded entities with their own sets of values and practices. Their 'distinctiveness should be encouraged', Wright paraphrases the report (1998:13), 'as it is by looking across boundaries between distinct cultures that people gain ideas for alternative ways of living'. The image presented actually resembles Darwin's (1985 [1859]) distinction between artificial selection (as in pigeon-breeding) and natural selection: artificial selection is rapid and superficial; natural selection is slow and deep. Creole culture, hybrid forms, global universals such as McDonald's (and human rights discourses?) must thus be seen as superficial; while tradition, associated with 'roots' and the past, is profound. Since the report does not distinguish between culture and ethnicity, it may perhaps be inferred that the 'deep' culture of tradition is associated with ethnic identity, while the 'superficial'

culture of modernity is not. As long as such a view is not supported by evidence, it must be questioned. The many passages on 'minority cultures', further, reveal a conservationist view of cultural diversity; in several places, diversity is seen as a value in itself. To whom? – the conservationists? The pluralism endorsed in the report does not seem to include post-plural hybrid forms, the millions of mixed 'neither-nor' or 'both-and' individuals inhabiting both global megacities and rural outposts in many countries. In other words, the right to an identity does not seem to entail the right *not* to have a specific (usually ethnic) identity.[10]

The report simultaneously emphasizes the right of peoples to cultural self-determination and the need for a global ethics – as if ethics and morality had nothing to do with culture. Of course, cultural self-determination may conflict with a global ethics, since morality is an important component of locally constructed worlds (see Howell 1996). Development is framed in context-sensitive, culturalist language; ethics is discussed in universalist terms. If minorities (and, presumably, majorities) share unique 'systems of values', these 'systems' may be expected to give moral instructions to their adherents; and if these 'systems of values' are to be defended from the onslaught of modern individualism, a call for global ethics seems a tall order.

At several points in the report, group rights are defended,[11] yet it is also committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is unanimous in according rights to individuals, not groups. The obvious dilemma in this dual position – the inevitable conflict between collective minority rights and individual rights – is not discussed. Had the problem been taken seriously by the authors, surely they would also have taken on the important question of the ways in which individual human rights could be adapted to local circumstances. For example, Johan Galtung (1996) is fond of pointing out that if nomads were given a say in the formulation of the declaration of Human Rights, the universal right to own a goat would have been high on the list; and if Indian villagers had contributed a paragraph or two, an essential human right would have been the right to die at home surrounded by family members. These suggestions show how locally embedded values may be different from, but compatible with, individual human rights.

Finally, identity politics is treated briefly and not confronted with other parts of the report, where respect and tolerance for others, tradition and change are dealt with in laudatory terms. Along with the intellectual quagmire resulting from the insistence on unspecified cultural diversity *and* global ethics, this lack is the most disquieting aspect of the report. Can groups be free? When do group rights infringe on individual rights? How can a state strike a balance between equal rights

for all its citizens and their right to be different? There is a very large literature grappling with these dilemmas,[12] which are not taken into account by the WCCP, which applauds 'minority cultures' while condemning majority nationalism, generally oblivious of the fact that minority problems are not solved, but removed to another level when minorities are accorded political rights on ethnic and territorial grounds (see the chapters by Cowan and Gellner in this volume). Fighting cultural fundamentalism (as in supremacist nationalism) with cultural fundamentalism (as in minority identity politics) is usually a zero-sum game.

In sum, surprisingly little attention is granted to the phenomenon of identity politics, whereby culture is politicized and used to legitimize not just exclusiveness, but exclusion as well. An epistemology grounding an individual's quality of life in his or her 'culture' does not pave the way for tolerance, respect and a peaceful 'global ecumene' (Hannerz 1989), and it is difficult to understand how the authors of *Our Creative Diversity* have envisioned the connection between the one and the other. In a recent volume on war and ethnicity, David Turton (1997) and his contributors show precisely how globalization and intensified contacts between groups in many parts of the world pave the way for the entrenchment of boundaries and violent identity politics, provided the political leaders are able to draw popular support from culturalist rhetoric. And as the anti-immigration lobbies of European countries might argue: 'Of course we respect others, but let them remain where they are, otherwise our culture of peace, inspired by UNESCO, will not stand a chance. A culture has the right to protect itself, and we are under siege from American vulgarity and Muslim barbarism!' This may not, in a word, be the most opportune time in world history for an organization committed to global humanism to provide arguments for cultural isolationism.

Culture and two Lévi-Strausses

It needs to be mentioned at this point that, although the previous paragraphs may have given the opposite impression, my attitude towards the UNESCO effort is largely sympathetic. Some of the shortcomings and self-contradictions of the report are, perhaps, inevitable given the composition of the committee and the need for compromise, and some of them cannot be easily resolved either in theory or in practice. Traditionalism and modernism, ethnic fragmentation and global unification are complementary dimensions of political processes in the contemporary world. Yet I have argued that the main con-

ceptualization of culture in the book is naïve, and scarcely serves the explicit political purpose of underpinning a 'culture of peace'. In dealing with the relativity of cultures versus the universality of ethics, it seems that *Our Creative Diversity* unwittingly reproduces the old German distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, which was especially popular in the interwar years. The former, sometimes associated with Tönnies' notion of *Gemeinschaft*,[13] is local, experience-based, unique and is passed on through socialization and the unconscious assimilation of local knowledge. The latter, the *Gesellschaft*[14] variety, is global, cognitive, universal and passed on through reflexive learning. It was frequently said about the Jews in the interwar Germanic world that 'they could acquire our civilization, but never our culture'. Does our creative diversity, then, refer to 'culture' or to 'civilization'? Doubtless the former, while the global ethics refers to the latter. Finkielkraut (1987) is therefore only partly right when he asserts that UNESCO quickly moved from a universalistic Enlightenment way of reasoning to a relativistic Romantic attitude: the recent report tries to encompass both, but it glosses over the contradictions rather than attempting to resolve them. As Finkielkraut rightly argues, any universal standards contradict any unqualified cultural relativism. This point was seen clearly a century ago by conservative French intellectuals like Maurice Barrès and Gustave Le Bon, when they argued against colonialism on ethnocentric, cultural relativist grounds: colonialism and the ensuing mixing of peoples would create confusion and moral erosion on both sides of the Mediterranean, and it should therefore be avoided. Now, this kind of view was already foreshadowed in Herder's writings against French universalism-cum-provincialism, but also in Franz Boas' cultural relativism, in later anthropologists' advocacy on behalf of indigenous peoples, in Le Pen's *Front National* program and that of apartheid, and in Claude Lévi-Strauss' work. Before moving to an examination of the two texts Lévi-Strauss wrote for UNESCO, it must be stressed, in order to preclude misunderstanding, that this does not imply that Boas' and others' defense of indigenous rights, apartheid and French supremacism are judged as similar political views; only that they draw on the same ontology of culture, namely the Herderian archipelago vision (cultures are discrete and bounded, if not entirely isolated) which lies at the historical origins of both cultural relativism and nationalism.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has arguably been the most influential anthropologist in the postwar era (which could be said to encompass the period 1945–80). While Lévi-Strauss' structuralism is a universalist doctrine about the way human minds function, his position regarding

culture has always been that of a classic cultural relativist. He regards cultural variation as the necessary experimental foundation for his theory of universals at the level of cognitive mechanisms. To French critics of anthropological exoticism such as Derrida, Baudrillard and Finkielkraut, Lévi-Strauss – in spite of his 'ultimate' universalism, but because of his 'proximate' relativism – is the very embodiment of *l'ethnologie*, the art of viewing natives in their natural environment in order to identify, classify and reduce them to so many laboratory specimens.

The shadow of Lévi-Strauss looms large over UNESCO ventures into culture theory. He was an honorary member of the WCCD, and he is quoted intermittently in the report. Much more importantly, UNESCO, at an early stage in its existence, commissioned a short text on ethnocentrism from him. The small book, *Race et Histoire* (Lévi-Strauss 1961 [1952]), has become a classic of anti-racism in the French-speaking world; it has been reprinted many times, and every year, he is reportedly approached by secondary school students who are obliged to write an assignment on the book and who despairingly confess that '*nous ne comprenons rien*' (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1988: 208).[15] The book, arguing along lines that are familiar to every contemporary anthropologist, warns against genetic determinism; reveals the fallacies of ethnocentrism and facile cultural evolutionism; defends the rights of small societies to cultural survival; and revels in the intricacies of the symbolic systems of societies unknown to the vast majority of his readers. There is a subtle irony in the fact that *Race et Histoire*, which – like the beautifully romantic '*Tristes Tropiques*' (1955) has later been invoked as politically correct *tiersmondiste*[16] literature fit for consumption by third-generation *beurs*[17] in Parisian suburbs and Senegalese university students. Lévi-Strauss has never been *tiersmondiste*.[18] On the contrary, as he explained, 'the societies which I defended [in *Tristes Tropiques*] are even more threatened by *tiersmondisme* than by colonisation' (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1988: 213), adding that 'I thus defend those little peoples who wish to remain faithful to their traditional way of life, outside the conflicts that divide the modern world.' This attitude makes Lévi-Strauss a strange bedfellow for UNESCO, a body tightly allied with a *tiersmondiste* outlook and whose principal *raison-d'être* lies in the dissemination of standardized, state-monitored education and modern means of communication in the so-called Third World.

Nevertheless, the main message of *Race et Histoire* went down well in the post-war decolonizing world of the early 1950s: cultures cannot be ranked according to their level of development; they are – to use a currently fashionable phrase – equal but different. Incidentally, Lévi-

Strauss' universalism is a long shot from the global ethics of *Our Creative Diversity*, although it cannot be ruled out that his structuralism could, at a formal and not substantial level, form the basis of some kind of universal ethics. Nevertheless, these would hardly be recognized as such by politicians and UN officials.[19]

Nearly twenty years after the success of *Race et Histoire*, UNESCO asked Lévi-Strauss to contribute a new text on the topics of ethnocentrism, race and culture. He now wrote a shorter piece, *Race et Culture* (Lévi-Strauss 1979 [1971]), which was received with more mixed feelings than the first commissioned work. Like his earlier text, it begins with a critique of the idea of race, but instead of discarding it as irrelevant for his purposes, he shows how pervasive notions of racial difference are in human societies, and how they contribute to the integrity of the group. 'We have a tendency', he writes (1979: 441), 'to consider those "races" which are apparently the furthest from our own, as being simultaneously the most homogeneous ones; to a White, all the Yellows [*sic*] resemble one another, and the converse is probably also true'. He notes the potential consequences of population genetics for anthropology, such that large questions regarding cultural history, pre-historical migrations, differentiation and so on may at long last be answered. He also concludes, in his characteristic Copernican way, that far from it being the case that culture is the product of race, 'race – or that which one generally means by this term – is one of several functions of culture' (Lévi-Strauss 1979: 446). Racial differences are the long-term outcome of tribal fission and the ensuing isolation of the segments ('How could it be otherwise?'). Later, he writes that 'mutual tolerance presupposes the presence of two conditions that the contemporary societies are further than ever before from fulfilling: on the one hand, relative equality [in relation to other societies], on the other hand, sufficient physical distance' (458). Also arguing that intergroup hostility is quite normal in human societies, and that conflict is bound to result from culture contact, the master anthropologist adds, within brackets, that without doubt, 'we will awake from the dream that equality and brotherhood will one day rule among men without compromising their diversity' (461).[20] It is, naturally, this dream that the WCCD has not yet awoken from, despite subscribing to Lévi-Strauss' general description of a world partitioned into cultures.

Assumed perils of culture contact

When this second text was published, many of Lévi-Strauss' former admirers in the French public sphere held that there was a contradiction

between the two texts, the one being a humanistic charter for equality, extending the ideas of the French Revolution to include the small and oppressed peoples, as it were; the other being a concealed defence for ethnic nationalism and chauvinism, in addition to speaking warmly of that dreaded discipline, human genetics. Actually, as Lévi-Strauss remarked much later (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1988: 206), the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, in attempting to show that Lévi-Strauss' views had changed, inadvertently quoted a passage from *Race et Culture* which he had actually lifted verbatim from *Race et Histoire*. Asked by Didier Eribon to elaborate on his views regarding immigration to France, as Lévi-Strauss is widely believed to be against mass immigration (see Todorov 1989), the master anthropologist replied that insofar as the European countries were unable to preserve or animate 'intellectual and moral values sufficiently powerful to attract people from outside so that they may hope to adopt them, well, then there is doubtless reason for anxiety' (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1988: 213). Confronted with these contemporary complexities, in other words, Lévi-Strauss prefers the simple assimilationist model from the Enlightenment to the cultural complexity represented by unassimilated immigrants. In sum, Lévi-Strauss' perspective on culture and intergroup relations is unhelpful as a theoretical matrix for UNESCO.

Many cultures or none?

Read closely, there is no doubt that the argument in *Race et Culture* is consistent with *Race et Histoire*. Towards the end of the earlier work, Lévi-Strauss stresses that in order to learn from each other, cultures need to be discrete; in the latter work, he reminds his readers and UNESCO that love of one's own culture, which is necessary for a strong group identity, implies a certain distance, which may easily flip into hostility *vis-à-vis* others. The seeming contradiction – which turns out to be a complementarity – between the two texts goes to the core of UNESCO's predicament. If an archipelago vision of culture is maintained, then it is easy to defend cultural rights and to support endeavours aiming at the strengthening of symbolic and social cohesion among collectivities seen as culture-bearing groups; but in that case, the notion of global ethics becomes difficult to maintain. In addition, there is no guarantee that this notion of culture will be used in a 'tolerant and respectful' way (the *Race et Histoire* perspective) and not in a hostile and defensive way (as in *Race et Culture*).

Another, related question concerns whether Lévi-Strauss' conceptualization of a world composed of small, discrete societies can offer a useful

concept of culture with which to analyse the contemporary world. He seems to deny it himself, regarding our time as a period of emergency when small societies are being obliterated (not least by their 'Third World' governments – there is no unanimous North-South manicheism here), the world is becoming too small for humanity, and contacts across cultural boundaries blur distinctions and threaten not only identities but also the comparative project providing structuralism with its data. Lévi-Strauss is, and has always been, an admirably consistent critic of universalistic ambitions of modernity, and his worldview is deeply at odds with the modernizing spirit that justifies UNESCO's development endeavours. UNESCO's attempts to accommodate notions of group rights and a concept of culture modelled on a more or less chimerical pre-modern tribal world contradict its basic commitment to individual human rights, universal education and global modernity. Individual rights, as defined since Locke, are sanctioned by a state, while group rights are associated with a collectivity at the sub-state level. One can simultaneously be a member of a cultural community and a citizen, but the social contract guaranteeing the equal treatment of citizens obtains between the citizen and the state. For this reason, it is misleading to speak of group rights, or even minority rights, if the issues pertain to, say, freedom of religion or linguistic pluralism.[21]

In real life, double standards are rarely twice as good as single standards, but in studies of social life, two descriptions are usually better than one. Not least for this reason, the UNESCO committee should be praised for attempting to arrive at a multifaceted description of culture in the contemporary world. Arne Martin Klausen, an old teacher of mine and a long-time critic of, and consultant for, development projects, often comments – slightly tongue-in-cheek – on the recent scholarly confusions over definitions of culture by proposing that several distinct concepts of culture are better than none. In his brief critique of *Our Creative Diversity*, Klausen says:

> It is of course regrettable that other people [non-anthropologists], who have started to acknowledge the importance of the cultural dimension, are now operating imprecisely within one single concept of culture that is so comprehensive that it becomes meaningless and inoperative, but we must nevertheless continue to underline the importance of between two and four different, but precise, concepts of culture as vital tools for understanding social complexities (Klausen 1998: 32).

My own conclusion is precisely the opposite of Klausen's, although it takes a similar description of the contemporary world as its point of departure. Since the concept of culture has become so multifarious as to obscure, rather than clarify, understandings of the social world, it may

now perhaps be allowed to return to the culture pages of the broadsheets and the world of *Bildung*. Instead of invoking culture, if one talks about local arts, one could simply say 'local arts'; if one means language, ideology, patriarchy, children's rights, food habits, ritual practices or local political structures, one could use those or equivalent terms instead of covering them up in the deceptively cozy blanket of culture. In a continuous world, as Ingold puts it (1993: 230), 'the concept of culture . . . will have to go'.

To be more specific:

(i)   What are spoken of as cultural rights in *Our Creative Diversity*, whatever they may be, ought to be seen as *individual* rights. It is as an individual that I have the right to go to the church or mosque or synagogue or not, to speak my mother-tongue or another language of my choice, to relish the cultural heritage of my country or prefer Pan-Germanism, French Enlightenment philosophy or whatever. As an individual I have the right to attach myself to a tradition and the freedom to choose not to.

(ii) There is no need for a concept of culture in order to respect local conditions in development work: it is sufficient to be sensitive to the fact that local realities are always locally constructed, whether one works in inner-city Chicago or in the Kenyan countryside. One cannot meaningfully rank one locality as more authentic than another. What is at stake in development work is not cultural authenticity or purity, but people's ability to gain control over their own lives.

(iii) Finally, it is perfectly possible to support local arts, rural newspapers and the preservation of historic buildings without using mystifying language about 'a people's culture'. Accuracy would be gained, and unintended side-effects would be avoided, if such precise terms replaced the all-encompassing culture concept. The insistence on respect for local circumstances, incidentally, would alleviate any suspicion of crude Enlightenment imperialism *à la* Finkielkraut. And, naturally, Radovan Karadzic and Jean-Marie Le Pen would not be pleased with such a level of precision.

If the mystifying and ideologically charged culture concept can be discarded, the case for a global ethics also seems stronger. As *Our Creative Diversity* shows, there can be no easy way out. The classic Enlightenment model (surprisingly applauded by Lévi-Strauss in response to a question about immigrants) represented by post-revolutionary France and contemporary Turkey, to mention two spectacular examples, has achieved a high score regarding equality, but a lamentable record concerning the right to difference. Within this political

model, homogeneity is seen as desirable for all, and the state-designated barbarians (Basques, Bretons or 'Mountain Turks' – Kurds – as the case may be) ought to be grateful, as it were, that someone bothers to integrate them into civilization. A classic Romantic model drawing on an archipelago vision of culture was evident in the apartheid system in South Africa, providing groups with 'cultural autonomy' and thereby preventing them from becoming integrated in greater society; bluntly put, it had a high score on the right to be different and a low score on the right to equality. Anyone who tried to talk about cultural rights to an ANC member before the transformation would learn a lesson or two about culturalist politics and the political pitfalls inherent in Romantic ethnology.

It is between these extremes that contemporary politics must manoeuvre, and neither notions of culture nor rigid universalisms have helped so far. It is for this reason that the unreformed Enlightenment position represented by Finkielkraut is unacceptable: A lesson from this past century of extremes must be that any imposition of homogeneity, whether from a state or from the self-appointed spokespersons of a 'group', is ultimately at odds with a notion of rights; and that, in Bauman's words (1996: 18), 'If the *modern* "problem of identity" is how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the *postmodern* "problem of identity" is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open'. This position does not imply that cultural creolization, flux and perpetual change are the only viable options; conservative choices are as valid as radical ones. Who, after all, is going to stand up and say that Borneo tribespeople, in the name of liberalism and universal human rights, should get a haircut and a job, start a trade union, or at least go and vote in the next elections? (Ironically, UNESCO is liable to stand up and say just that, given its positive view of state-monitored development.)

With a French thinker I began this piece, and with a French thinker I will end it. Tzvetan Todorov, in his thoughtful and beautifully written *Nous et les Autres* (1989), ends his long and winding journey through French conceptions of cultural (and racial) difference from Montaigne to Lévi-Strauss with an ambivalent conclusion, saturated with his own and others' struggles between ethnocentrism and relativism, universalism and particularism, individualism and collectivism:

A well-tempered humanism [*un humanisme bien tempéré*] can protect us against the faults of yesterday and today. Let us break up the simple connections: to respect the equal rights of all human beings does not imply the renunciation of a value hierarchy; to cherish the autonomy and freedom of individuals does not oblige us to repudiate all solidarity; the recognition of a public morality does not

inevitably lead to a regression to the times of religious intolerance and the Inquisition [. . .] (Todorov 1989: 436).

Since the word culture divides but an unqualified rejection of the relevance of local circumstances oppresses, this kind of cautious and ambivalent position is the only valid starting-point for a humanistic politics that tries to achieve the impossible: equality that respects difference, 'a sense of belonging to a community larger than each of the particular groups in question' (Laclau 1995: 105). To achieve this end, the concept of rights is more useful than the concept of culture.

Postscript: winds of change in an anthropological semiperiphery

At the initiative of Marit Melhuus, the anthropology department at the University of Oslo inaugurated in 1997 an annual series of topical debates inspired by the success of the GDAT debates in Manchester (Ingold 1996). The first debate concerned conceptualizations of culture, and the motion to be discussed was actually purloined from *Our Creative Diversity*. A particularly clear passage from the executive summary, it read as follows:

Cultural freedom, unlike individual freedom, is a collective freedom. It refers to the right of a group of people to follow a way of life of its choice [. . .] It protects not only the group, but also the rights of every individual within it (UNESCO 1995:15).

Two members of staff were enrolled to argue in favour of the motion, and two were asked to argue against it. Signe Howell and Harald Beyer Broch, the supporters of the motion, had both carried out extensive fieldwork among indigenous peoples – Howell in Malaysia and Indonesia, Broch in Canada and Indonesia – and had in the course of their fieldwork witnessed the more or less enforced encounters between vulnerable indigenous groups and modern state apparatuses. The two opponents, Halvard Vike and myself, had been working in modern, complex societies where the populations tended to turn towards the state rather than away from it in order to have their rights sanctioned – Vike had recently completed his PhD on local politics in a Norwegian county, while I had carried out research on ideology and the politicization of culture in the poly-ethnic island states of Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago. Speaking from very different ethnographic horizons, the antagonists not only reached opposite conclusions, but also failed to engage in a proper dialogue: they tended to depict each other, in the heat of the debate, as hopeless Romantics and cynical modernists,

respectively. The two in favour of the motion argued from the vantage-point of indigenous peoples in Indonesia against state dominance, language death and global capitalism (see Samson's chapter in this volume). The opponents spoke about the multi-ethnic (and in some cases, post-ethnic) nature of contemporary European and North American society, and how the politicization of culture had drawn public attention away from issues of rights and distribution of resources. In other words, the debate mirrored the more general controversies surrounding the communitarianism–liberalism divide in contemporary politics and political philosophy, and also illustrated the fact, un-surprising to an anthropologist, that where you stand depends on where you sit.

After the debate, the audience was invited to vote on the motion. At the final count, seventy-eight voted for it and seventy-five voted against it. Although all academic categories were represented, the audience mostly consisted of undergraduates. Ten or fifteen years ago, there would almost certainly have been a massive 'yes' vote, anthropology undergraduates having been for decades notorious for their Romantic bent and for regarding indigenous peoples' struggle for autonomy as a general model for politics. Perhaps the tide will turn again. In any case, it is likely that the questions summarized in the above quotation from *Our Creative Diversity*, and which have been discussed in this piece, will be increasingly central to the global political agenda in the decades to come. If this prediction holds, anthropologists – no longer the bearded and greatcoated explorers plying remote waters in search of radical difference – may, provided they are as flexible as the identities they theorize about, attain a pivotal societal role as political analysts.

NOTES

1 In English, 'formation'.
2 The English translation of *La défaite de la Pensée* is called, somewhat idiosyncratically, *The Undoing of Thought* (Finkielkraut 1988).

3   In order to exemplify the wide scope of the organisation's activities, let me
    mention that my father was employed by UNESCO in the 1970s to super-
    vise and help organise a number of rural newspapers with a clear educational
    bent in various African countries.
4   UNESCO's current slogans read:
    Strategies for development
        promoting lifelong education for all;
        assisting in the advancement, transfer and sharing of knowledge;
        enhancing the concept of cultural heritage and promoting living
        cultures;
        promoting the free flow of information and the development of com-
        munication.
    Strategies for peace-building
        encouraging education for peace, human rights and democracy, toler-
        ance and international understanding;
        promoting human rights and the fight against discrimination;
        supporting consolidation of democratic processes;
        encouraging cultural pluralism and dialogue between cultures;
        contributing to conflict prevention and post-conflict peace-building.
        (Source: http://www.unesco.org)
5   The World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) responsible
    for the report had thirteen full members with academic, political and artistic
    backgrounds, from Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the USA, Greece, Norway/
    Sápmi, Senegal, Switzerland, Brazil, Egypt, Japan, Russia, Zimbabwe and
    Argentina. In addition it had *ex officio* observers from India and Mozam-
    bique, as well as honourary members including Burmese human rights
    activist Aung San Suu Kui, West Indian poet Derek Walcott, Belgian
    physicist Ilya Prigogine, American writer Elie Wiesel, a couple of Arab
    princes in succession, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The Commission's work
    was led by Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary-General of the
    UN.
6   'Once the Commission was in place', explains Lourdes Arizpe, Assistant
    Director-General for Culture, UNESCO (Arizpe 1998), 'the three years that
    followed comprised nine consultations in the different continents in which
    some 120 speakers took the floor'.
7   In English, 'a heaven-sent opportunity'.
8   On the archipelago view of culture, see Eriksen 1993.
9   See for example Arizpe's (1998) response to Wright (1998).
10 As an exemplification of this point, the high suicide rates among youth in
    Finnmark county, Norway, an area associated with the formerly transhumant
    Sami, is often attributed locally to identity problems: the young Sami can
    neither fulfil the expectations of Sami traditionalists nor of Norwegian
    modernists; they are condemned to leading a hybrid life with no fixed
    identity. From the viewpoint of culture theory, it must be asked whether the
    problem lies in their cultural repertoire or in the local ranking of people
    according to their ability to fit stereotypes of bounded cultural identities.
11 For example in paragraph 3, 'The protection of minorities', in the chapter
    on global ethics.

12 See for example Kymlicka 1989, Taylor *et al.* 1992, Wilson 1997.
13 In English, 'community'.
14 In English, 'society'.
15 Literally, 'we don't understand anything'.
16 In English, 'third-worldist'.
17 French slang word for second- or third-generation immigrants from North
    Africa, living in the suburbs.
18 On this background, Finkielkraut's (1987) coupling of 'fourth-worldist'
    Lévi-Strauss with Frantz Fanon in *La défaite de la pensée* is curious, to say the
    least. *Tiersmondisme*, 'third-worldism', is a modernist emancipatory ideology
    promoting self-determination and equity for poor countries, while 'fourth-
    worldism' defends the traditional culture of tribal societies. Needless to say,
    the two do not combine well in practice, as many visitors to Sandinista
    Nicaragua in the 1980s discovered when they looked into the conditions for
    the indigenous Miskito.
19 See Lévi-Strauss 1983, ch. 12 for intimations to this effect.
20 Commenting on Lévi-Strauss, Todorov (1989:108) says: 'If one really has to
    choose between the two evils – cultural relativism and unilineal evolutionism
    – the latter is preferable, on the cognitive level as well as on the ethical level',
    before reassuring his readers that there are alternatives to these extremes.
21 See Eriksen 1997 for a full discussion of this dilemma in Mauritius; see
    Kymlicka 1989, ch. 7, for a Canadian example.

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Part II

Claiming cultural rights

The four chapters included in the second part of the book explore how activists involved in grassroots cultural or ethnonationalist movements have been claiming rights based on what they perceive as 'their culture'. While these local-level case-studies are concerned with realities taking place in various continents – Europe, Southeast Asia, Central America and North America, respectively – they make similar points. One is that the articulation of such claims, which oppose the politically dominant view in the country where they are made, has been directly dependent on an international arena and a global forum which have encouraged their expression, at the same time as local circumstances have shaped the precise form of this articulation. Another point is that the significance and ultimate motive of these claims can only be understood by paying attention to the local context, as moulded by history. Finally, the essentialization of culture is inherent in the making of such claims. Each author, in his or her own way, reveals how such rights processes lead to particular predicaments.

In her study of Macedonian minority claims in Greece, Jane Cowan introduces the concept of 'minoritization'. With this term, she refers to the transformation of a fluid identity into one of supposedly ontological quality in order to fit legal and political criteria. In the region Cowan has studied, this transformation has been accomplished since the mid-1980s by activists whose words resonate in international fora ready to take on board the activists' message without asking whom they represent. Cowan shows, however, that the question of representation – and of numbers – is a crucial one. In the wake of a complex regional history, many of those ostensibly represented by the activists do not themselves claim a Macedonian identity in so far as this entails rejecting their Greekness. Nor do they necessarily refer to the non-Greek language they use in some circumstances as Macedonian. While there are indeed people who perceive themselves as members of an oppressed minority, their numbers should not be inflated. Cowan acknowledges the courage