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Ethnocentrism vs. World Unity:
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ETHNOCENTRISM AS A SOCIAL NEED AND DISEASE

by

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ETHNOCENTRISM AS A SOCIAL NEED AND DISEASE

I shall approach the problem of ethnocentrism as an anthropologist, which means that I consider it mainly and basically as an aspect of culture, as this is conceived by anthropology: an integrated and complex set of concepts and norms that are accepted by a human group as its standard of education and behavior.

What is the relationship of ethnocentrism with human culture and behavior? If we refer to the way ethnocentrism is visualized by most writers as we shall see presently it is surprising to realize how diffused and prevalent is the opinion that ethnocentrism is basically a despising attitude of mind by which one's own culture is considered superior to all other forms of culture. As a consequence ethnicism is generally condemned as an evil to avoid.

In fact the concept implied by the term ethnocentrism is not as simple as that. Not everything in it is bad. Maurice Freedman in describing the concept of ethnocentrism does avoid making a sweeping statement and while he writes of ethnocentrism as attitudes which uncritically presuppose the superiority of one's own group or culture he is careful to note that the word ethnocentrism is "nearly always used pejoratively" (Freedman 1977:215). I wish to call your attention to this qualification: obviously Freedman visualizes some good use of the word however rare.

Indeed, the concept of ethnocentrism needs clarifying, especially with regard to its first component *ethnos*. I will come back to that, as it will be the subject of much of what I shall be saying.

Anthropological discussion

Ethnocentrism is not a basic concept of anthropological theory. Only relatively recently has it become a clearly articulated issue of study and

discussion in theoretical and applied anthropology. It is used mainly in connection with the concept of ethnicity, ethnic groups and the boundaries between groups. As I have already stated by relating ethnocentrism to the basic concept of culture, I think we should be able to find more in it than the mere concept of ethnicity and ethnic group. We can point to the idea of both self-identity and ethnic identity, both relevant for understanding the relation between the individual human being and culture and between the individual and the group with relation to culture.

We owe the introduction of the term ethnocentrism and its first definition to William Graham Sumner. In his work *Folkways*, 1906, he defines it as follow: "the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." (Sumner 1906:12) The key to the concept is found in the words "one's own group is the center of everything". But what is a group? The extension of meaning that this word is capable of supporting is simply surprising and sometimes so equivocal as to make the term meaningless.

Whatever the meaning we attach to the word group, the main concept conveyed by Sumner's definition is the implication of a moral valuation of existing values, a one-side evaluation based on the values of one's own group. Onesidedness is the opposite of comparative judgment: there is always another side to every problem, and it is a fundamental rule of correct judgment that one should not be the judge in his own case: *nemo iudex in causa propria*. In other words, Sumner's definition describes ethnocentrism as a negative phenomenon.

In developing the concept, introduced first by Sumner, some anthropologists have been inclined to stress its negative consequences by considering ethnocentrism as an emotional phenomenon, almost a "herd instinct", though, as George P. Murdock does in his entry on Ethnocentrism in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, 1931, it is also considered a "cultural factor". What Murdock says is as follows: "ethnocentrism emerges in human society as a cultural factor of considerable significance ... and it is found in all sorts of social groups: families, sibs, phratries,

local communities, classes, castes, sects, races," etc. (Murdock 1931:613).

In Murdock's view, "ethnocentrism, receives strong support in the marked tendency of the people to think in terms of group rather than of individuals". "It is far easier to label an individual with a class designation, such as Jew, capitalist or atheist, and thus pigeonhole him once and for all, than it is to arrive at a reasoned estimate of a complex personality, an estimate, moreover, which is necessarily tentative and subject to change with increasing acquaintance." (Murdock 1931:614).

In Murdock's view, therefore, it would seem that ethnocentrism could be avoided and remedied if only one would be able to think in terms of individual human beings rather than of groups. He stresses, however, the complexity of a reasoned estimate and its relative value conditioned to the grade of personal acquaintance.

Murdock goes on to propose some remedies against ethnocentrism in the advantages of "trade and economic contacts" as "more impersonal and unpremeditated forces" against ethnocentrism; in "traveling" as a way for developing "tolerance of the outsider and his beliefs and practices"; he also assigns "a prominent role to education" and the social science (Murdock 1931:614). While all these suggestions go in the right direction, I think Murdock falls short of his own perception of ethnocentrism as a cultural factor, and that he does not pursue the implication that he would have developed by analyzing the relations between the individual and the group.

Ethnic groups

In more recent times anthropologists have contributed to the discussion of ethnocentrism mainly in the perspective of ethnicity, as I have already mentioned. I will limit myself to refer in a special way to two works: *Ethnic groups and boundaries* edited by Fredrick Barth (1969) and *Ethnocentrism and Intergroup Attitudes - East African Evidence* edited by

Marylinn B. Brewer and Donald T. Campbell (1976).

May I say at once that I regard these two works and other similar works on ethnicity very important. They are based on a precise definition of the idea of group, which they take as ethnic group, and they try to analyze the problem of ethnocentrism from a very definite perspective. However, I think that they also fail to set the problem of ethnocentrism in its proper focus. We need to go deeper than that.

Barth remarks that social anthropologists have largely avoided the study of ethnic groups "using", as he says, "a highly abstracted concept of 'society'. He and his colleagues take stock of their field work in different parts of the world, and try to analyze "the empirical characteristics and boundaries of ethnic groups, and the important theoretical issues which an investigation of them raises." (Barth 1969:9). From their discussion "two discoveries" - as Barth calls them - have been made. First, that boundaries between ethnic groups "persist despite a flow of personnel across them". Secondly, that "social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses" (Barth 1969:10). (The dichotomy being: we and the others.) This means that "cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence." (Barth 1969:10).

In their analysis, Barth and his colleagues take "a generative viewpoint", in other words they try to explore the processes by which ethnic boundaries are established and how they are maintained. It is their conclusion that "ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people"; therefore we are warned not to imagine - as we normally are led to do - that each ethnic group is actually "developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation, mainly in response to local ecological factors". In spite of cultural and social interaction between peoples differences persist. Interaction, in fact, is so structured as to allow the persistence of cultural differences ... by "insulating parts of cultures from confrontation and modification". (Barth

1969:16)

The apparent contradiction between the practice of interaction and the practice of insulating parts of culture is an evident sign of the ambiguity that is inherent to the forming of a personal and ethnic identity: by being identical to yourself or to your ethnic group you differ from other individuals or other ethnic groups. One is identical to oneself by birth and by basic cultural commitment. Indeed, according to Barth ethnic identity is based "on criteria of origin (i.e., birth) and commitment (which commitment can be only understood as basic cultural commitment).

However basic these criteria they are apt to lose their strength. In spite of birth and in spite of a first basic cultural commitment people may choose to change their identity. The casuistry may be manifold. The immigration phenomenon implying the acquisition of a new ethnic citizenship in a plural society like, for instance, America, provides a probing evidence. To explain what I want to say, though, I will refer to South Africa, in the days I lived there (four decades ago), and to the frequent criticism raised by the Afrikaners (the white Dutch-speaking community) against the white English-speaking community. The Afrikaners, who regard South Africa as their only mother country, complained that the British immigrants in America were prepared to think of themselves as Americans, while those in South Africa were not considering themselves as Afrikaners or Africans and continued to regard and speak of Britain as "home".

The analysis of some East African peoples leads Brewer and Campbell to remark that "since the demarcation between 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' (we and they) is essential to the concept of ethnocentrism, the assessment of ethnocentrism is inextricably tied to the perception of group boundaries". They synthesize their conclusion, together with those of other anthropologists, in the following points: 1) cases of territorial interpenetration of ethnic groups are frequent; 2) continuity, rather than discontinuity, in cultural and linguistic characteristics of neighboring groups is normal; 3) there are inconsistencies among peoples in a region in assignment of ethnic labels and intergroup demarcations; 4) formal and

informal social contact and social interaction across ethnic communities may reach high levels; 5) there are cases of shifts of ethnic identification on the part of individuals or groups within particular regions. (Brewer and Campbell 1976:133).

Essentially, these points coincide with the second of Barth's discoveries, that is that "social relations are maintained across boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses". Indeed, this is no new discovery, since from the very beginning of anthropology as a study of cultural history and evolution, it was shown that people's movements and contacts, especially through migration, were the normal means of cultural diffusion. This was a basic tenet of the cultural historical school (based in Germany) from Ratzel to Schmidt, as it had been before of the evolutionary school. Yet theirs was a different perspective, one aimed at discovering the origin of culture; Brewer and Campbell as well as Barth, take the same phenomenon of people's contact and movements, in terms of confrontation between the "ingroup" and the "outgroup".

A point made by Brewer and Campbell seems to me to be noteworthy. They write: "Under such conditions (i.e., of rapid change), individuals are likely to exhibit opportunism in their pattern of interaction and alliance, being free to shift perceptions of group loyalty in order to maximize advantage of differential group identification in different realms of activity." (Brewer and Campbell 1976:136)

I propose to comment on the concept of opportunism raised by this passage. Normally the word is taken in a derogatory sense and we tend to blame and condemn whomever we describe as an opportunist, a person who is prompt in taking the best of any opportunity without any regard to the moral implications of his behavior, or a person who normally puts his profit and private interest above and before his social obligation and his communal duty. But let us for the sake of the argument set aside the negative and moral implications of the usual concept, and see whether its cultural implications may help us to understand the phenomenon in a

different perspective. Unfortunately opportunism is rarely if ever the subject of discussion and analysis in the anthropological literature. I propose to see it as a form of practical cultural relativism and a phenomenon directly connected with cultural change.

Let us take the case of social migration, internal (say, from Southern Italy to Northern Italy) as well as foreign migrations (say from Italy to other countries in Europe, or from Europe to America, Australia, and so on). A first observation regards the different attitudes of the individual members of the same ethnic group with regard to the choice of migration. Some are inclined to remain strongly attached to the place and the way of life of their forefathers and would never move. Some, on the contrary, are ready to face every hardship for new opportunities of improving their economic situation and their social status. Indeed the common saying that one's own country is where bread and butter are found, however cynical it may sound, describe the basic reason for modern and ancient migrations. There are even cases (and I think every one of us would be aware of some in his own experience) when people not only abandon their mother country but change their family name to complete, so to speak, the change of their lifestyle and let other forget about their old culture. In Italy we are usually emotionally attached to our homes and unless we break totally with it we are not so disposed to change residence, a trait which is the opposite of the American openness to move from community to community. This we take as a sign of recent historical roots and of a very different culture.

Indeed, when individuals or groups (family groups or even communities) exhibit opportunistic behavior, they give evidence of how little value they attach to those elements of their own culture which they are willing to abandon. Though not without pain, they abandon aspects of their culture in order to achieve their final aim of some kind of cultural and social maximization. It is in this way that, all through the ages, many a cultural change have been brought about and even new societies and new ethnic groups have taken shape. The nations of America provide typical examples of this

phenomenon, and the United States is prominent among them and rightly takes pride in its plural ethnic basis and in the fact that it has offered the opportunity for a better life to so many peoples: but the American way of life is now a new form of culture derived from the mixing of many different cultural elements contributed by people who have been prepared to face the change by renouncing much of their old traditions.

Finally, Brewer and Campbell observe that "in general, the data from the East African survey do not represent such pattern (i.e., of consistent polarisation of affect associated with the classic ethnocentrism syndrome), in that rating of outgroups by a particular ingroup tend to be neither highly polarized nor consistent from one rating dimension to another." (Brewer and Campbell 1976:137)

Cultural relativism

At this point I want to note the absence in the 1968 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* of an entry for Ethnocentrism. The word is still to be found but only in relation to other entries such as Culture and Cultural Relativism. As I have just mentioned cultural relativism in connection with the term "opportunism", I think it useful to take some moments for deepening the meaning of the connection of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism.

The Cultural Relativism entry in the 1968 *Encyclopedia* was written by David Bidney. He distinguishes four meanings associated with the expression. Thus, cultural relativism can be 1) a method in ethnology and social anthropology; 2) a theory of cultural determinism and a philosophy of cultural reality; 3) a guide to the evaluation of value systems, especially ethics, politics, and aesthetics; 4) an attitude toward practical problems of sociocultural reform and change. I will treat each of these in turn.

As an anthropological method, cultural relativism leads the enquirer

to describe a culture "from the perspective of participants in or the adherents of a given culture". In other words, we are to understand a culture in its own terms rather than in terms of our own culture. In terms of cognitive anthropology this is called the *emic* approach. In terms of standard anthropology it is an implicit aspect of the central method of anthropology, participant observation.

As a theory and a philosophy of life, cultural relativism refers to the position taken by Melville Herskovits soon after World War II. Inspired by the neo-kantian spiritual anthropology of Ernst Cassirer, Herskovitz attempted to find an antidote to the tragic presumption of the Nazi doctrine of Arian cultural supremacy. In this sense cultural relativism postulates a metacultural reality, that is the idea of nature, which makes possible progress and development beyond the limitations of cultural forms.

As a guide to the evaluation of value systems, cultural relativism constitutes an approach to moral evaluation as "expressions of individual emotions" without any objective basis in fact. "The cultural relativist is very much concerned lest we commit the fallacy of ethnocentrism, which consists in the attitude that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others." Hence, a cultural relativist avoids judging others.

Bidney indicates comparative knowledge of one's own and other cultures as "the only antidote to ethnocentric prejudice". This implies that it is possible to transcend the limits of cultural conditioning by empirical observation of cultural behavior. He ends by saying: "The comparative study of cultures has made us conscious of the danger of uncritical ethnocentrism but it has also provided us with the materials and the incentive to transcend the limitations of both cultural relativism and ethnocentrism through the pursuit of scientific truths concerning facts and values."

More definitions

At this point I think it useful to refer to some definitions of

ethnocentrism by two African writers, an anthropologist and a philosopher.

Asmaron Legesse, an anthropologist of Ethiopian origin now living in America, proposes a distinction of three "interrelated types of ethnocentrism. We might label these *sentimental*, *vicarious*, and *cognitive*. The essential feature of sentimental ethnocentrism is self-glorification and a belief in the superiority of one's own culture ... The second type of ethnocentrism is somewhat more subtle. Laymen and scholars alike can fall under its influence. Every student of culture who has done fieldwork has experienced it. After living in an alien society for an extended period of time, the observer's world is altered. The more conscious he is of the internal validity of the culture, the more likely that he will adopt the cognitive structure of his hosts and accept their stereotyped images of neighboring societies as a valid description of the reality. This form of vicarious thought is largely benign and easily corrected through the exchange of information by social scientists who have investigated adjacent societies.

The malignant version of vicarious ethnocentrism occurs when the student of culture builds up an entire interpretive model based on native ethnocentrism." (Legesse 1973:276-277)

Cognitive ethnocentrism is defined by Legesse through the analysis of an historical treatise of the social system of the Galla (Dromo) of Southern Ethiopia by Eric Haberland, following which he states: "This is the essence of *cognitive ethnocentrism: the inability of the social scientist to understand the thought processes of another society except through the mediation of his own culture. When the investigator's cognitive models prove to be irrelevant to the culture under study, his data become a primitive mass of uncoordinated facts and the society in question appears culturally bankrupt.*" (Legesse 1973:283; italics in the original)

What Legesse has defined "cognitive ethnocentrism", V.Y. Mudimbe, the philosopher, marks out as "epistemological ethnocentrism", "namely, the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or comes from 'us'." (Mudimbe 1988:15). Mudimbe

does not stop at this. "I distinguish", he writes, "two kinds of 'ethnocentrism': an epistemological filiation and an ideological connection. In fact they are often complementary and inseparable. The first is a link to *episteme*, that is, an intellectual atmosphere which gives to anthropology its status as discourse, its significance as a discipline, and its credibility as a science in the field of human experience. The second is an intellectual and behavioral attitude which varies among individuals." (Mudimbe 1988:19).

The analysis of the concept of ethnocentrism in terms of peculiar definitions could be extended to one's own will, but at that point it seems to become a sterile exercise. I may quote an essay by Vittorio Lanternari, an Italian anthropologist, in which he lists seven different types of ethnocentrism: 1) mythological and expressive; 2) linguistic; 3) epistemological; 4) aggressive and discriminatory; 5) religious and colonialist; 6) technological and juridical; 7) critic ethnocentrism (Lanternari 1979).

Anthropos and ethnos

Rather than to push the analysis to search for all the negative connections of ethnocentrism and the prejudices brought about by them, I think it useful to consider ethnocentrism as a universal phenomenon of a polar character showing at one pole a positive and an imperative need and at the other pole a negative and pathological character.

If we consider the universality of ethnocentrism which makes it an unavoidable phenomenon, are we really employing the right perspective when we limit our analysis only to the pathological aspects of the phenomenon? Are there not some positive aspects in it by which peoples and individuals all over the world tend to make their own culture - or the vision they have of their own culture - their point of reference for evaluating other peoples' cultures?

It is my contention that only when we are aware of its positive character we may better understand how ethnocentrism may develop into a pathological attitude and thus be in a position to find out a possible method to avoid such a decay and to suggest a valid therapy to cure it.

In trying to ascertain what positive aspects inhere to ethnocentrism, I think we have first to stress the fact that ethnocentrism pertains to the realm of culture. We have to realize that ethnocentrism, *per se*, is not a vice but a normal cultural fact. As a cultural fact, it is caused - for better and worse - by the dynamic process which produces the entire phenomenon of culture.

Analysis of the dynamic process of culture shows, beyond doubt, the basic importance of the interaction between the individual human being (whom I call *anthropos*) and the group to which he belongs - whatever its level and dimension - from the nuclear family of his origin to any other type of group and, especially, the ethnic group: the group, so extensively defined, I call *ethnos*. It is in the interaction of *anthropos* and *ethnos* that we shall be able to discover the positive assets of ethnocentrism.

The interaction of the individual-*anthropos* and the group-*ethnos* is not a simple one. It is, however, a kind of opposition between the two sources of cultural energy somehow analogous and somehow different. The individual, thanks to his/her impulse to live his/her life following his/her own individual character and situations, is able to produce some creative or innovative contribution in the interpretation of reality and to apply and adjust to his/her own way the pattern of life on which he/she is moulded. We are not to be misled by the passive attitudes that, in the process of his/her development, the individual is apt to suffer. The group-*ethnos*, which is formed by the aggregation of a number of individuals, contributes to culture by its normative force which regulates and orients the way of the individual members, enabling them to come and remain together as a group. The creative or innovative force of the individual, on one side, and the normative, coercive force of the group on the other side, constitute the dialectic of the interaction of these two factors in the

dynamic process of culture. It is from this process that the cultural pattern of a group takes its form and structure, a process that can be empirically observed in living situations, as, for example, when an individual is initiated into a group or when a group assembles to perform a ritual or any other collective action. The human condition, at this stage of the evolution, appears to enhance the social and the cultural value of the group: an individual is always born within a group. This leads to stress more the significance of *ethnos* vis a vis of *anthropos*. But the process of cultural dynamic is brought about by the interrelation of the two factors, *ethnos* and *anthropos*. However, it is not that that matters. The important point is that culture - and every cultural fact - is derived from the interaction of the individual and the group. You cannot separate the two.

One comment comes immediately to mind, and that is that ethnocentrism is not to be taken as a *factor* of culture: the individual-*anthropos* and the group-*ethnos* are the *factors* of culture. Ethnocentrism - as a cultural fact - is one of the many products of the interaction of the individual and the group as factors of culture.

Now, it is by contributing individually to the process of culture, that every individual - each one of us - gains his/her self-identity, and by his/her interaction with his/her own group-*ethnos* he/she gains his/her ethnic identity. Self-identity and ethnic identity are, indeed, two facets of the same phenomenon, only logically distinguishable. In actual fact they are one. "Ethnic identity", write Fredrick Barth, "is similar to sex and rank, in that it constrains the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined situations." (Barth 1969:17)

We can, thus, say that ethnic identity cannot be really separated from self-identity. Indeed, by ethnic identity an individual knows that he is a member of an ethnic group, but as a member of that group he wants to be himself, in other words he wants to be able to contribute to the group, in fact he is expected to do so by the group as a whole as well as by every other individual member.

Now, let us analyze the extension of the word 'group'. For the sake of the argument, let us take the nuclear family of origin to be the group, and let us take the child to be the individual member of that group. As such the child is related to his parents and possibly to other brothers and sisters. The family acts as the normative force which affords the individual an orientation in his/her everyday life, or - better - a pattern of culture. The child is expected to adhere to that pattern, and is told to behave responsibly, to use good judgment before acting, to be critical of his/her own behavior. The individual is left free to make his/her own decisions, to apply the pattern to his/her individual situation. It is at this crucial point, when he/she makes his/her own choice, when he/she acts critically, that he/she gains his/her self identity, and at the same time by matching to the general pattern he/she also gains his/her ethnic identity.

Individual responsibility, good judgment, acting critically, are what I consider the positive aspects of ethnocentrism.

Where can an individual take the elements for good judgment or for acting responsibly, if not from the pattern he is being offered and shown by his group of orientation? If I might be allowed to speak for myself as a way of illustrating what I have been saying, there is no doubt that I am inclined to see things basically as an Italian. The Italian culture is my normal point of reference, and it is only through a comparative process of reasoning and evaluation that I am able to reach an autonomous opinion that will allow me to differ radically from the common pattern of the Italian culture. Thus, I am here living as an Italian among Americans and I feel, and you feel in my regard - however unconsciously - as if I personify the Italian culture. As a consequence I am expected to have an opinion and to explain (and to justify) behavior and facts of Italian life which normally, in Italy, would leave me entirely indifferent or uninterested or which, indeed, I might criticize or condemn.

Personifying a culture is a typical form of normal ethnocentrism. Sometimes it can prove an impossible or an unbearable task, unless it is

accomplished with a sense of criticism of one's own culture or, in other words, unless one has a well balanced sense of his own culture, which is what I call 'positive' ethnocentrism. This is the reason, in my judgment, that ethnocentrism - as the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything - must be reckoned as a necessary or unavoidable element of cultural implementation, that is of the actual concrete living of every individual and of every group. So, by itself ethnocentrism is part of good cultural health. Unfortunately, it can also become a sign of cultural pathology.

Ingroup and outgroup

Before we analyze how that can be, I think it necessary to stress once more the relativity of the idea of group.

We have seen that the ethnocentric polarisation is normally analyzed in terms of "ingroup" and "outgroup". Now, these two concepts are essentially relative: a nuclear family in relation to other similar families may be an "ingroup"; similarly, a community, a municipality, a town, a nation with relation to other communities, municipalities, towns, nations, may be an "ingroup". This kind of structural relativism has been long recognized by social anthropologists, especially in the study of chiefless societies. It stands at the root of cultural relativism in connection with the idea of the self-identity and ethnic identity.

Abstractly, the personal and ethnic identity is an absolute need for every individual and for every human group; empirically it is a very relative device by which it is possible to define one's own identity in relation to every concrete situation, however opportunistic that might be.

If ethnocentrism, however unconsciously, is the basis of good judgment, of responsible behavior, of critical acting, it follows that it is no longer a positive fact when it serves as the basis of biased acting, irrational behavior, and rash judgment.

In other words, ethnocentrism must be kept under control. If it is not, it can mount to fever temperature, causing self conceit and contempt of others, both as individuals and group-members. At this stage, ethnocentrism can become a cause of individual and social malaise which can affect every kind of cultural and social expression. There can be no limit to it, from mental and verbal hatred to brutal violence. Indeed, under this aspect the list of the forms ethnocentrism can take may become endless, and their consequences tragic.

What are the remedies?

Let us take stock from recent history or also from living experience. The history of the Nazi-regime and of the holocaust as the history of the *apartheid* regime of South Africa of which we are living witnesses, show in a tragic way that if pathological ethnocentrism is allowed to prevail, it will bear tremendous sufferance, disasters and war as well as genocide. When ethnocentrism takes a pathological form it becomes extremely difficult, if at all possible, to stop it. It is a cultural cancer.

The only real remedy is preventive.

It is commonly said, as we have seen, that education and comparative knowledge, through the social sciences, are the only antidotes to ethnocentrism. Indeed, that is so. But we must be warned. *Per se* not even education is sufficient, and comparative knowledge is not easy to obtain.

An education aimed at preventing ethnocentrism from decaying should first be based on the realization of the positive aspects of ethnocentrism. While one is educated to refer to a definite culture as the basis of his/her personal identity taking pride in its traditions and characters, he/she has to be educated to realize that others too have their own culture and that the existing differences between cultures are not to be seen in terms of superiority, rather as consequences of different environments, of special situations to which human beings have to adapt their knowledge and

their mode of life.

In my opinion the right time for fostering such an attitude toward respect and comprehension of human culture diversity is the same time when one is educated to develop his/her own cultural identity. Education to a positive and rational use of ethnocentrism is not separable from the normal process of education. A process, one must observe, that is never complete: permanent education should be normal education. By developing one's self-identity we are apt to consider our own vision of the world as the true one, indeed the truth itself, and we feel obliged to honor that identity. Truth and honor: these are, indeed, two difficult problems especially when related to actual cultural and social facts, those facts that make up our life.

We always search for truth. Anthropology shows that almost every people in the world, as an ethnic group, thinks or has thought (and there is evidence in mythology) to be or to have been the true human being, the only true human being, all others being foreigners, barbarians or evil beings. (Even the San, commonly known as the Bushmen, of the Kalahari desert in Southern Africa, think of themselves as the true people: *ju/wasi*, as against the *ju-dole*, the others or "strangers", as well as "bad", "worthless", "harmful" or "potentially harmful" people. (Marshall 1976:17,22). The fact is that every one of us is to him or herself a point of reference for the search of the truth. But, how many "every one of us" are there? How many points of reference do, therefore, exist beyond our own?

Honor means to be true to oneself, to be true to one's own group.

The need of comparing ourselves to the pattern of our group, to the patterns of other groups, will help to keep our ethnocentric temperature in the lower degrees. There is modesty in doing things - *est modus in rebus*, there is measure - modesty - in doing things.

In my experience as an anthropologist I have become convinced that we are normally misled when we refer to cultures in terms of superiority and inferiority. By so doing we adopt a perspective which rarely helps to

clarify basic concepts and frequently leads to misunderstanding among peoples, straining their relations to the point of rupture and of violence. Of course, there are competitions between individuals as well as between groups in every society. That may lead to progress but it may also be the cause of tensions and conflicts frequently inducing violence and war. It is said that "modernization tends to decrease ethnic heterogeneity" (Olzak and Nagel 1986:1). Mass communication as an efficient means of spreading education may help tremendously to that end. But in spite of all evidence, I am not entirely convinced of the unqualified value of that statement, when I think of such extreme ethnocentric attitudes that still exist in modern societies as those based on language in Belgium or on religion in Northern Ireland and in the Near East.

Positive ethnocentrism should lead us to a balanced evaluation of our own culture and it is the best antidote to pathological ethnocentrism if properly developed by sane education. If we are aware of the basic need of every people and of every individual to be true to one self and to their ethnic identity, we can learn to value our own ethnic identity in a way that will never offend others, and we shall learn to act in our own social relations with modesty (I will not necessarily say with humility).

ABSTRACT

Ethnocentrism has been identified by anthropologists as being at the root of racial and ethnic prejudices. If we consider its universal diffusion and frightening resurgence, we realize that there is a paradox in the very conception and expression of ethnocentrism. Being conscious of belonging to a culture is an essential factor of personal identity and in that very sense ethnocentrism may be considered to possess a positive value. However ethnocentrism may grow pathological if personal and ethnic identity is used to despise others and to develop a feeling of superiority towards all who do not belong to one's own social group. As such ethnocentrism cannot but be a serious social disease often expressed in subtle forms. However, only if we are aware of the positive aspect of ethnocentrism we may hope to find ways of curing it, its best remedy being a kind of education leading to the respect of others while helping to mould one's own personal identity.

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