

Ethical Dilemmas of Cultural Relativism and Sustainable Development

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Introduction

From the first step, all budding anthropologists are aware of cultural relativism. A loosely defined concept, which explains a simple solution to a simple problem; to conduct ethnographic research, a scientist must be able to observe a culture without the hindrance of ethnocentrism. However, once the anthropologist moves beyond the scope of research, be it working in academia, or applying research to contemporary issues of environmental conservation, cultural relativism becomes a dangerous foreshadow of stagnation. An anthropologist, who is trained to observe with a culturally relative perspective, in theory, is bound when it comes to dealing with environmental issues. The aim of this project is twofold: first, to understand the development and rational behind cultural relativism as an anthropological concept, and second, to redefine this open-ended concept to allow future anthropologists to apply their knowledge and skill set to issues dealing with the universal-human.

Literature Review

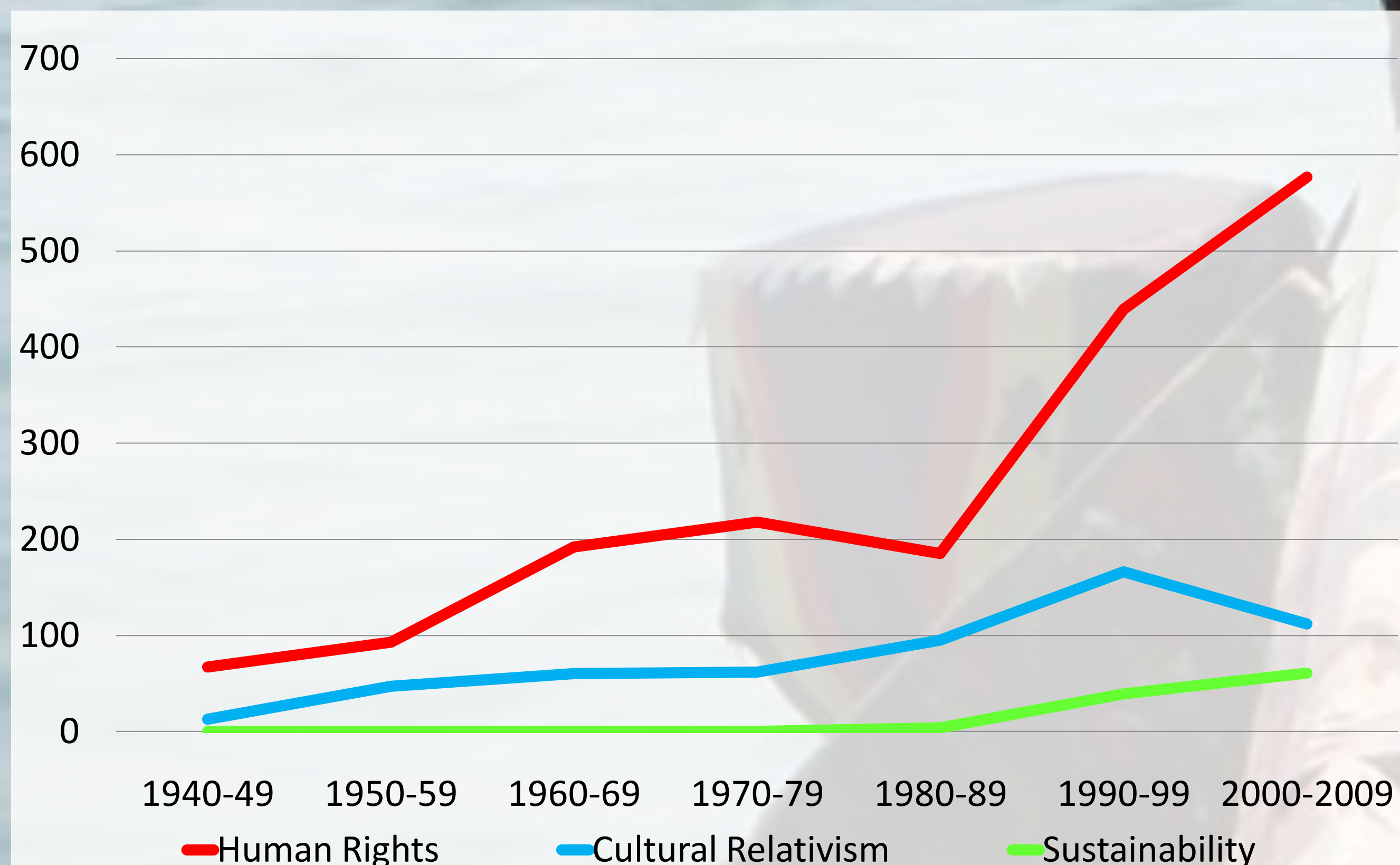
Cultural relativism was born into the field of cultural anthropology with the work of Franz Boas. Though his original theoretical perspective was intended to counter the evolutionary theory, arguing that cultures do not follow the same path of development, but instead each develops independently within its own historic context¹. The term cultural relativism was not used until the 1950s when it was coined by the students of Boas, largely Ruth Benedict. The term itself comes from epistemology², the study of human knowledge, where it is a theory proposing that there are not absolute facts when it comes to human beliefs³. Benedict and many of her contemporaries, changed cultural relativism from a theory of cultural development into a tool for ethnographic research, ideally removing culturally biased judgments².

Since Benedict, many anthropologists have expanded upon, decreased or redirected the scope of cultural relativism, leading to a blurred and somewhat open ended definition of the term. The *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* defines cultural relativism as an idea, theory and tool².

The importance of cultural relativism was often been a matter of debate throughout the 1980s and 90s. Champions of the theory, like Clifford Geertz⁴, often argued that relativistic though is the only way to conduct ethnographic research, while critics, like I. C. Jarvie⁵, would argue that cultural relativism is a conservative and dated approach to understanding inter-cultural conflicts.



Figure 1. Sustainable Development is a Balancing Act between Environmental, Cultural and Economic Progress



Graph 1. Occurrence of Key Terms in *The American Anthropologist* by Decade from 1940 to 2009

Conclusion

The issue breaks down into where the ethical obligation of the anthropologist lies: to protect the cultural sovereignty of a population, or to encourage a universal ideal that a sustainable economy would benefit all populations. In the case of the Ghanaian artisanal fishing communities in West Africa, should the anthropologist side with the fishermen, who are already catching less than they need to survive off of, or do you side with the youths, who will potentially lose any ability to survive off of marine resources if the fisheries are depleted.

The best option available to the anthropologist is public education. By educating the public of environmental concerns, and potential solutions, the power of economic change can be placed in the hands of the target population.

The Ghana Department of Wildlife has begun a public outreach campaign, teaching fishermen to identify keystone species, and the importance of releasing bycatch⁶. Since then many of the indigenous fisher folk have willingly decided to be more selective in their harvesting of marine resources.

References

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Methodology

To understand the purpose and development of cultural relativism in anthropology a literature review was conducted. A timeline of the concept and term usage was created, following the development, application and criticism of cultural relativism, from its origins in philosophical circles, to its definition in contemporary introductory level anthropology textbooks.

I then evaluated my understanding and application of cultural relativism in my own academic endeavors. To do this I turned to class notes taken throughout my career as an undergraduate anthropology student, and to my field experiences working on a sea turtle conservation project in Ghana.

Discussion

Cultural relativism is largely responsible for making anthropology what it is today, the generally unbiased study of human kind. However, globalization and increased intercultural relations have given new birth to beliefs of a universal human destiny. Like never before, organizations and political entities around the world are striving to bring about universal ideals, which do not accommodate most cultural value systems.

The idea of sustainable economic development is one of these universal ideas; that everyone would benefit if the global economy were to maintain sustainable resource use. However, many of these programs involve encouraging ethnic groups around the world to adapt to, usually foreigner-defined, resource management practices.

For the last 80 years, many anthropologists have debated the place of anthropological study and application of cultural relativism in issues of universal ideals, mainly human rights. However in the last decade, since the appearance of the sustainable initiatives, debate over cultural relativism has fallen [graph 1]. The exact reason for this decline cannot be known, however there is still a great need to define cultural relativism and its place in applied anthropological endeavors.

One of the keys to a successful sustainable development project is understanding the culture in which the effort is being conducted [figure 1]. Anthropological study is absolutely essential for such an understanding, and applied anthropological research is critical to developing any sort of community outreach and educational programming.

The issue comes about when cultural relativism teaches anthropologists that cultural beliefs and practices are specific to their own historic development, and are outside of the scope of the anthropologist's judgment. Therefore it is morally and ethically inappropriate for an anthropologist to use their research to promote undesirable economic change.

