

## **A solution to Elizabeth Colson's paradox of anthropological empathy**

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*Abstract.* This paper presents a relativistic interpretation of Colson's paradox of anthropological empathy and a solution.

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*Since you ask me what our lord is*

*Upon his face there is a fizz,*

*When I see him I become a wife*

*And he becomes a sharpened knife.*

In a book early on this decade, Richard Werbner presents Elizabeth Colson's paradox of anthropological empathy, regarding the way in which anthropologists extend their empathy:

Colson called her fellow social anthropologists to be conscious of a paradox: proud of our capacity for empathy, we suffer from a constitutional – almost necessary – lack of it when it comes to the 'others' who are our predecessors and ancestors. She reopened the question of continuity within apparently radical change: how very far we ourselves had moved from our association's founding moment, immediately after the Second World War, and yet how near we still circle back to past predicaments and old dilemmas in new guises, given our unwitting custom of actively dismissing the past or merely forgetting it. (2020: 76)

The basic idea is that anthropologists empathize with the various peoples whose cultures and societies they study – the Trobrianders, the Andaman Islanders, the Azande, and so forth – but they show no empathy towards their predecessors in anthropology. How can that combination be justified? Are they not contradicting themselves?

A solution to the paradoxical phenomenon is to start by saying that empathy for anthropologists takes the form of cultural relativism. Here is an attempt to spell out this doctrine more precisely:

When you are in society A you should evaluate actions by its principles – A1, A2, and A3 say – rather than imposing your own principles.

When you are in society B you should evaluate actions by its principles – B1, B2, and B3 say – rather than imposing your own principles.

When you are in society C you should evaluate actions by its principles – C1, C2, and C3 say – rather than imposing your own principles.

And so on.

On the surface, this is not inconsistent with being rather harsh with earlier anthropologists, because they are regarded as members of the same society as newer ones and failing to abide by some very general shared principles. “Being the handmaiden of colonialism is wrong by our common liberal principles.” But there is a question of whether the whole relativistic doctrine is coherent, because it seems then that one ends up respecting societies which do not respect most others, such as Nazi societies, if one happens to be there. (This paper is not a bad move, by the way.)

**Reference**

Werbner, R. 2020. *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.