

the requirements of psychological representability. This is much better than the playful but dangerous metaphors others have used to characterize the way culture "works." Is culture like an octopus, "a rather badly integrated creature"? It is a dubious assertion, even if you accept (though I do not) Geertz's characterization of the unfortunate octopus. For what the metaphor intends is this: to add a degree of flexibility which other symbolic approaches in cultural anthropology (postmodern or otherwise) generally lack. It is supposed to protect anthropology's concept of the cultural "system" by defending it against charges of procrustean formality. It allows systematicity where it exists, but it does not insist on it, and claims to welcome the opportunity to describe the different contextual variables which call into play different combinations. These are worthwhile and necessary goals. However, in the absence of a psychological framework, it still lacks criteria for evaluating its representational validity. In contrast, the cognitive-symbolic approach described here can be tested because it generates propositions that can be falsified, using what we know about memory, motivation, and causal inference.

### Confusionism: An Ethic of Significant "Others" for the '90s

By Richard A Shweder (U Chicago)

While augury is always a hazardous enterprise, the true predicament of culture for Western liberal democracies during the next decade may well be an ethical one: to evolve an appropriate attitude to cultural diversity in a postmodern world. Should current trends continue—the global reemergence of primordial ethnic identifications, the decline in the authority of the hegemonic bureaucratic state, the tension between "market values" and "communal values" in the world system—a classical problem in culture theory will have relevance for public policy debates. Ethnicity is likely to be to the '90s what outer space was to the '60s. It remains to be seen whether the last decade of the 20th century will also be anthropology's moment in the sun.

The classic problem I have in mind is the problem of rationality or psychic unity. A brilliant treatment of the underlying logic of the problem can be found in Rescher (*Rationality*, 1988), which I paraphrase here while adding the illustration.

Consider the following four propositions. No theorist can endorse all four of those propositions, because taken together they are incompatible. Every theorist must reject at least one of the propositions, but which? Which one(s) would you reject?

*Proposition 1.* We are rationally justified in our conception of things (for example, that authors have a right to publish books critical of the revealed truths of scripture).

*Proposition 2.* They, the members of another culture, have a different conception of things (for example, that a book critical of scriptural revelation is blasphemous and blasphemers should be punished).

*Proposition 3.* They, the members of that culture, are rationally justified in their conception of things.

*Proposition 4.* If members of another culture are rationally justified in their

conception of things and it is different from ours, then we cannot be rationally justified in our conception of things, and vice versa.

Now consider some anthropological "solutions" to the problem. If you rejected only proposition 1 you are an inverse developmentalist or a reverse ethnocentrist. You view your own culture as backward, and other cultures as more advanced.

If you rejected only proposition 2 you are a universalist, perhaps an advocate of ecumenism. You think cultural differences are superficial or merely "skin deep."

If you rejected only proposition 3 you are a proselytizing monotheist. You view other cultures as backward or primitive, and your own as closer to God or to the truth.

If you rejected proposition 1 and proposition 3 you are a skeptic or a Nietzschean emotivist. You view culture as merely conventional and "made-up," an irrational arbitrary form based on whim or power, a fit object for ridicule.

If you rejected only proposition 4 you are a confusionist. You believe in the irreducible multiplicity of rational forms and the polytheistic nature of reality. Alternatively you believe that the most important things in life are cognitively undecidable or ultimately mysterious. If you are a postmodern confusionist you may find yourself valuing ethnic diversity and revaluing the premodern past as art or artifice (See Shweder, *Thinking Through Cultures*, for a fuller discussion of the four propositions and of various schools of thought in contemporary anthropology).

These days in public policy debates it seems to be proselytizing monotheism that has firmest grip on popular consciousness, although (despite the best efforts of Ernest Gellner) it remains a minority position within anthropology. Indeed, the myth of progressive monotheistic development is almost

commonplace in discussions about current events in Eastern Europe, especially when the rejection of Moscow's coercive influence is interpreted as equivalent to the adoption of consumerism, market pricing, individualism and other natural truths.

This is not surprising. One of the central origin myths of the modern period in the West is the idea that the opposition between religion-superstition-revelation-communalism-hegemonic rule versus logic-science-rationality-individualism-free market rule divides the world into then (the dark ages) and now (the enlightened present), them and us.

Whether the myth will continue to serve our liberal democracy well or help us understand the primordial fault lines currently fracturing and rearranging the East remains to be seen, although I have my doubts. One listens to anthropological voices to enrich the ethical discourse of the '90s with the alternative cosmogonies. It may even be time for a postmodern appreciation of premodern community, as we try to imagine our way into a new age of ethnic separation, local cultural efflorescence and global interdependency.

### About the Authors and This Column

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## SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Richard Chalfen, Contributing Editor

### Summer School in Ethnographic Film

The Center for Visual Anthropology at USC has announced an intensive summer school program in ethnographic film, highlighted by two courses which, as described by their brochure, "will provide an opportunity to utilize the resources of the center in covering a wide range of theoretical and practical issues in ethnographic filmmaking. This small and intensive program caters to both the experienced student of visual anthropology looking to deepen critical and production skills and at the novice aiming to become familiar with the concepts and practices of ethnographic filming and filmmaking." Two courses, *Ethnography and Ethnographic Filmmaking* (Anth 510) and *Urban Anthropology* (Anth 499) will be led by instructors Andre Singer, Alexander Moore and Dan Marks. Additional information can be obtained from Debbie Williams, Dept of Anth, USC, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0032, 213/747-4176.

### Film Festival

The Fifth International Festival of Ethnographic & Anthropological Films

will be held in Sardinia, Italy, October 5, 1990. The theme of this year's festival (which takes place every two years) will be "islands"—presenting an overview of anthropological films dealing with both the condition of people living on islands—in a strict geographical sense—and of those peoples or social groups who are "isolated." Deadline for the arrival of films and application forms June 25. More information may be obtained from Istituto Superiore Regionale Ethnografico, Via Mereu 56-0810 Nuoro, Italy (Tel 0784/35561-3147-37484).

### Film Jurying Set for Santa Fe

Joan Williams has finalized the date for this year's SVA/AAA film/video jurying. Jury members will meet at the Anthropology Film Center (AFC) between May 23-28. Anyone who has submitted an application for the competition must make sure that the film/video arrives at AFC by no later than May 16 (PO Box 493, Santa Fe, NM 87501; 505/984-4127).

### Urge to Vote

I wish to encourage all SVA members