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CULTURAL RELATIVISM, CONFLICT RESOLUTION,

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Peter W. Black and Kevin Avruch

I Introduction

Jim Laue was a major figure in conflict resolution and he is sorely missed. His absence is particularly regretted because his was a strong voice in discussions over the ethical dimension of conflict resolution, arguing eloquently and passionately in favor of a self-consciously ethical theory and practice of conflict resolution. Sometime colleagues of Laue, our work over the last decade has argued equally passionately (if not as eloquently) in behalf of a self-consciously cultural theory and practice of conflict resolution, (see Avruch and Black 1987, 1991, 1993; Black and Avruch 1989, 1993).

Reflecting on Laue's work raises for cultural anthropologists an important question: Is a culturally informed conflict resolution compatible with an ethically informed conflict resolution? Or does the specter of cultural relativism require that one or the other be dropped? In this essay we take up three of Laue's related concerns, prenegotiation, empowerment, and social justice, and discuss each in relation to cultural relativism. We attempt to show how, in our terms, a methodological cultural relativism can enhance the first, an epistemological cultural relativism handicaps the second, and a normative cultural relativism, properly understood and deployed, need present no threat to the third.[1]

II Laue and Conflict Resolution

Those who knew Jim Laue only superficially might never have seen past his affable and unfailingly courteous demeanor to his underlying strength. Those who knew him better—who saw him function as a colleague, a mediator, an advocate—knew that underneath this quite genuine presentation of self was a man of strong opinion and iron determination, who possessed a steeliness that could surprise his newer acquaintances or interlocutors. More often than not, this side of Jim was revealed in the course of some negotiation with him over matters he considered principled. Indeed, getting to see and appreciate this determined side of Jim was getting to know him. That underlying strength was always much in evidence when he wrote about, taught, or practiced, conflict resolution. Three aspects of conflict resolution especially seemed to elicit this toughness: the problem he called "getting to the table," the variety of third-party roles, and the ethics of intervention.

He was concerned always with a particular, early, stage in the larger process, what some have called the "prenegotiation" stage but what Laue preferred to call simply "getting to the table" (e.g., Laue, et al. 1988). Especially in dealing with community disputes, where emotions ran high, power often was unevenly distributed, and matters of entrenched enmity, race, and racism were often involved, Laue understood that no amount of third-party expertise or process-virtuosity would help as long as the parties could not come together. Laue approached getting to the table as a sort of technical problem to be solved in the larger context of process implementation. Secondly, Laue analyzed in some depth the different roles a third party intervenor might assume (Laue and Cormick 1978:212-16; Laue 1987). He was well aware that more often than not a wide variety of intervenor roles were subsumed in the "mediator" role. Laue, seeking precision, wanted to reserve for that role a rather narrow and specific domain, something about half-way between "activist" and "enforcer." The activist, deeply committed, is closely tied to one side of the dispute and thus may appear indistinguishable from that side to the other party or to outsiders. The enforcer, in contrast, is usually external to the dispute (though a part of the larger system within which it is encapsulated). As police, court, arbitrator, or funding agency, the enforcer gets to wield the formal, coercive power by which agreement-compliance is maintained, or, if no agreement is reached, by which the dispute is forcibly (and thus, usually, temporarily) "settled." Two other roles, flanking the mediator as it were, include the "researcher" (more distant from the disputants than the mediator) and the "advocate" (closer than the mediator, but further removed from the parties than the activist).

In one sense, Laue was interested in clarifying the different intervenor roles in the same spirit he brought to the investigation of prenegotiation—as a technical matter in conflict resolution. But in another sense, Laue's concern with intervenor roles had a different source, and here we come to both the third aspect we mentioned, ethics, and his iron determination.

He believed that an intervenor's reflexivity about roles was crucial to ethical practice. This, however, was not a reflexivity put in the service of a postmodern aesthetics (there seems to have been very little in postmodernism to which Laue was sympathetic), but in the service of enhancing the intervenor's self-awareness, humility, and political praxis. Conflict resolution is like medicine, Laue believed. Naive or misdirected intervention could actually do harm, could make matters worse. Therefore, an awareness of the different roles available to third parties, and especially of the relations of power and party-commitment to each role, was central to a conflict resolution practice that put the intervenor squarely on the side of the politically and economically disadvantaged party struggling to attain equity and justice. The first principle of a Laue-inspired intervention was that the third party was never a philosophical neutral, never just a "hired-gun" whose credo was "Have Process, Will Travel" (cf. Moore 1993). Unlike some others in the field with a more technocratic (not to say profit-motivated) orientation to conflict resolution, Laue's first loyalty was never to the process itself. It was above all to a vision of social justice; from this vision flowed the determination, the unexpected hardness beneath his surface cordiality.

III Ethics, Social Justice, and Empowerment

The third aspect of conflict resolution, then, that deeply engaged Laue was the question of the ethics of third-party intervention. Laue saw this as a problem emerging out of the great success that conflict resolution, on several fronts, seemed to be enjoying from the mid-1980s onward. In 1984, after a long campaign in which he was one of the leaders, Congress created the United States Institute of Peace. Large foundations, like Ford and Hewlett, began to support research and development. .Scholars and researchers responded, increasingly orienting their work towards problems in the field. Universities (not least George Mason) began to offer courses and advanced degrees in conflict resolution. In growing numbers, students were being educated—or, to use a differently valenced locution, trained—in the universities as well as in

independent workshops and free-standing courses. Many of them then worked as mediators in alternative dispute resolution (ADR) programs, as ADR gathered momentum and became institutionalized in the lower courts of many states (see Avruch and Black 1996).

The rapid growth of the field of conflict resolution concerned Laue greatly. Its emergence as a market-driven professional career, along with pressure towards increasing professionalization, including discussion of credentialing, or even licensing, practitioners (see Scimecca 1991) raised serious issues for him as did the field's historically uneasy differentiation from an older university concentration in "peace studies." Some scholars in the latter tradition accused conflict resolution of being overly concerned with technical issues and under-attentive to ethical and moral ones (see Katz 1989). All these factors convinced Laue that attention to ethical issues could not be postponed.

For Laue, "the single ethical question" that dominated each and every intervention in community-level disputes was unambiguous:

Does the intervention contribute to the ability of relatively powerless individuals and groups in the situation to determine their own destinies to the greatest extent consistent with the common good? (Laue and Cormick 1978:217-18). [2]

Note, first, that Laue presumed the existence of (as he put it) "in-parties" and "out-parties." In-parties are usually establishmentarian, better organized and institutionalized, possessing greater access to resources than out-parties. Note also that power (expressed here by its relative paucity for out-parties) is a crucial, defining feature of the situation and of the parties.

This single, dominating question, Laue said, emerged from his basic assumption about the nature of human nature, or, as he phrased it differently a little later on in the argument, from a "doctrine of the person." (This difference, we shall see, is important.) By nature fallible decision-makers who above all seek meaning, humans ought to be treated as ends in themselves (cf. Black and Avruch 1989:191). Three "core values"—Laue's center of ethical gravity—flow in turn from this doctrine, summarizable as empowerment, justice, and freedom.

Laue linked these values with a conceptual logic firmly rooted in his sociologist's understanding of social action. First comes empowerment, the guarantor of social justice, which is the "ultimate social good." Justice, a social variable, in turn guarantees freedom, an attainment of individuals. A just society is one in which public decisions are fully participative, and key resources are adequately and equitably distributed. In such a society individuals enjoy maximum freedom to determine their destiny consistent with the common good. These conditions are prerequisite to the "ultimate terminal value: human fulfillment" (Laue and Cormick 1978:219).

Because of the dominant role he assigned to power and empowerment, Laue rooted the conceptual logic of his ethics in an understanding of social action. The world, he understood, is, as Manning Nash has put it, a place "where power, wealth, and dignity are unevenly and illegitimately distributed within and among nations" (1989:127). Nash's wealth and dignity echo Laue's justice and freedom. But consider what remains: whereas justice and freedom are desired goals or end-states, power is what is necessary to bring those conditions about. In this sense, Laue showed himself to be a consummate realist. The out-party's possession of power is, ultimately, the only guarantee that it will at least be given a hearing by the establishment. In the absence of any effective power—even if, initially and typically, power only to disturb the status quo—the in-party has no need to recognize or listen to the out-party.

From these insights Laue derived the central task, the "immediate ethical mandate," of a third-party intervenor: to empower the out-party "proportional" to the establishment party. Once again, Laue was unambiguous as to the meaning of (proportional) empowerment:

It refers to a condition in which all groups have developed their latent power to the point where they can advocate their own needs and rights, where they are capable of protecting their boundaries from wanton violation by others, where they are capable of negotiating their way with other empowered groups on the sure footing of respect rather than charity (Laue and Cormick 1978:219).[3]

Two important points are entailed by the intervenor's ethical mandate to empower the out-party. First, Laue rejected out of hand the notion that the intervenor (mediators included) could be in any way "neutral" in community disputes: neutrality, he argued, almost always tended to favor the establishmentarian status quo. Secondly, this ban against assuming neutrality extended to the process itself. (Here, Laue differed from many fellow practitioners who seem to put process above everything.) Hence, the intervenor should never use his or her skills and knowledge to empower "racists, sexists, fascists, militarists, or religious bigots, for to do so would be to contribute to violation of the very premise of human fulfillment" (Laue and Cormick 1978:222).

In sum, a commitment to justice, freedom, and human fulfillment defined Laue's approach to third-party intervention and conflict resolution. These values are enabled through empowerment, the central task of the intervenor. They are derived from Laue's conception of human nature, what he also called a "doctrine of persons." Taken together, these generate a morality that prescribes ethical practice. We are confident that many, if not most, practitioners would subscribe to these values and this practice-- as do we; this does not mean, however, that they are unproblematic.

IV Human Nature and "Core Values"

The problem, it seems to us, has to do with culture, or more precisely, with potential distortions in situations of intercultural conflict and intervention. It is not, we hasten to add, that Laue was ignorant of cultural differences and their possible negative impact on successful practice. Especially when conceived (as in community disputes) as ethnicity or race, Laue was sensitive to cultural difference on the level of "style" and communication process (see, for example, Laue and Cormick 1978:226). By culture, however, we mean something deeper than style. Culture here connects to the most basic assumptions of Laue's ethical system. At least three issues are raised.

First, Laue seemed to vacillate between speaking of his basic assumptions as having to do with human nature, on the one hand, and a doctrine of persons on the other. They are not the same thing. To speak of human nature is to assert a given (see Avruch and Black 1990). In this sense, human nature is out there to be discovered, like natural law. In contrast, a doctrine of persons is, like any "doctrine," something that is created. One does not discover a doctrine, one invents it; one might uncover human nature, one imagines a doctrine. These differences are not merely semantic. In moving between the two formulations, we think Laue recognized, if not quite acknowledged, an unresolved confusion in his basic assumptions. We may agree that there is a transcultural, panhuman human nature; but surely doctrines (of persons, or anything else), being socially created, contested, and validated, are sensitive to cultural variation.

Secondly, we must direct attention to Laue's "core values" themselves. Can we say with confidence that justice and freedom are either parsed or socially instantiated the same way cross-culturally? Do such values transparently extend across cultural boundaries? What are the implications for an ethical

intercultural practice if we cannot make these assumptions with confidence? Should we presume to make them with confidence?

Finally, what of power, the prime mover in Laue's ethics and his sociology? True to his realist tendencies, Laue treated power as a sort of unexamined "primitive" in his ethical system. But, is power, like justice and freedom, sensitive to cultural variation?

Linked to deeper currents of ethics and morality, all of these questions about cross-cultural variation bring us face to face with the vexed issue of cultural relativism, an issue we believe to be of fundamental importance to a culturally informed theory and practice of conflict resolution.

V Cultural Relativism

"Cultural relativism" is often used as an all purpose hammer with which to beat on positions which (like ours) hold that some feature of human social life (like conflict) is "culturally constituted" and thus requires a cultural analysis for its understanding. The great majority of such attacks, however, badly misconstrue both their target and cultural relativism, imputing a kind of vacuous cosmopolitanism to what often is no more than a rather straightforward methodological point. Such attacks frequently are attacks on a straw man. If it were nothing more than this, though, questions of cultural relativism could simply be dismissed as part of that general fog of overblown rhetoric which has arisen to shroud so much of academic discourse in over-heated accusation and counter-accusation. But that is not the case: hidden in the fog are real issues, some of which are of great relevance to conflict resolution. In our opinion, sorting out those issues is worth some effort.

We are far from the first to attempt to clarify cultural relativism; as anthropologists we are able to draw on a heritage of argumentation on this topic going back to the early years of our discipline.[4] Furthermore, this heritage has periodically engaged the attention of scholars outside the discipline, especially moral philosophers. All this activity has resulted in a substantial literature. We neither intend to review that literature here nor to offer definitive solutions to any of its philosophical contradictions and puzzles. What we shall do is discuss some of the implications of the issues covered by that literature for the socially engaged discipline which Laue did so much to build.

It seems almost customary when embarking on a discussion of cultural relativism to begin by bemoaning the confusions wrought by a failure to precisely define terms and/or to be consistent in the use of those terms once defined. Many typologies have been offered to correct this problem. For our present purposes a tripartite division into methodological, normative, and epistemological relativism is most useful. For conflict resolution we urge methodological relativism (the suspension of ethnocentrism in cross-cultural analysis) as a prerequisite for an adequate conflict analysis, necessary as a precondition for both prenegotiations and for resolution. Next, we examine the implications of normative relativism (defined as the recognition that normative systems differ according to social setting) for third-party intervention. Here we address social justice as a normative principle. Finally, we urge those interested in conflict analysis and resolution to avoid epistemological relativism (understood as the notion that there is no sure way to make confident choices between competing culturally constituted versions of reality) because it is both self-falsifying and self-defeating. We demonstrate this point through a discussion of power and its relationship to conflict resolution. This is a particularly opportune time to address these issues because recent developments in culture theory make it possible to begin to move beyond those features of cultural relativism which, rightly or wrongly, have proven so troublesome in the past.

Postmodernism, despite its contribution to that fog of hypertrophied academic rhetoric which we mentioned above, has made at least one signal contribution to the advancement of knowledge of the human condition (even if its more extreme proponents would deny that such knowledge is possible). By forcibly drawing attention to the inadequacies of earlier notions of culture, postmodernism has opened up a space for reconceptualizing culture in a more powerful and useful form.

In all the debate over cultural relativism, the culture to which such things as values, morals, perception, standards, and so forth were said to be (or not to be) relative was left largely unexamined and undefined. Cultural relativism grew out of anthropology and given that field's widely recognized failure to reach consensus on a precise definition of culture, arguably its master concept, this is understandable. Anthropologists arguing about relativism sometimes have been able to set aside their many differences about how to define culture. Those from outside the discipline who found themselves drawn to the debates over cultural relativism however, have been left to their own devices over the meaning of that "culture" to which this phenomenon or that was or was not relative. Thus, it is no surprise that a kind of default definition of culture seems present in much of the literature addressed to cultural relativism.[5]

Left undefined by the anthropologists, culture is assumed to be (1) uniformly distributed, (2) discretely bounded, (3) synonymous with society, and (4) causally potent. Each of these assumptions is unwarranted. Each leads to conceptual and analytic dead-ends. Each can be usefully set aside to be replaced by more productive ideas. Since we have developed these points at length in earlier publications (e.g., Black and Avruch 1989; Avruch and Black 1991), here we shall simply advocate: (1) refraining from assigning agency to culture, (2) distinguishing it from society, (3) recognizing that cultural frontiers are highly permeable and far from isomorphic with social boundaries (let alone national borders), and, finally, (4) acknowledging that culture is unequally distributed across society so that not all members of the same society possess the same cultural attributes. This more subtle and nuanced perspective on culture has much to offer conflict resolution, not least in how it deals with issues of cultural relativism.

What happens to the debates over cultural relativism when a less primitive set of assumptions about culture is brought into play? In brief, methodological relativism emerges unscathed as an analytic tool, especially useful for prenegotiations; normative relativism is transformed, highlighting Laue's wisdom in grounding social justice in his doctrine of the person; and epistemological relativism remains untenable as a position from which to develop theory and methods for the practice of conflict resolution, leading as it does to an inability to grasp the nature of power.

VI Methodological Relativism and Getting to the Table

Local understandings, including values, ethics, and morals, vary from society to society. This observation, grounded in the vast ethnographic record accumulated by generations of researchers, is arguably the fundamental contribution of anthropology to social knowledge. Spiro (1986:259) has referred to this as "the fact of cultural variability," and it has important consequences. Local understandings play a significant role in social action. Most people most of the time act in ways they are able to justify by those local understandings as at least ethically neutral if not virtuous. It follows, therefore, that if one's goal is to understand the actions of most people most of the time (i.e., culturally appropriate behavior) in a society beyond one's own cultural frontier, one must at least temporarily set aside the notions of appropriateness used at home. This is not to say that judging the actions of so-called "cultural others" is illegitimate, but it is to say that such judgments are liable to preclude understanding. This is the sense in which cultural relativism—recognition of the fact of cultural variability—is a methodological principle, calling for the suspension of judgments in the service of understanding. Of course, if judgment is the goal

and understanding is irrelevant, then cultural relativism is beside the point—one merely adopts what could be named "cultural irrelevantism." But as long as understanding (whether framed as analysis, explanation, explication, or interpretation) is the goal, methodological relativism has an important role to play.

It certainly has an important place in conflict resolution. Elsewhere (Avruch and Black 1993), we have argued that cultural analysis is an important correlate—indeed, often a prerequisite—to conflict analysis, particularly in intercultural settings. And cultural analysis is predicated on methodological relativism: a lifting of the burdens (and the comforts) of moral judgments. For contesting parties, these judgments are apt to be especially pointed and emotionally loaded in the earliest stages of the resolution process, and responsible third-party intervenors need to understand this dynamic if they are to help the parties come to the table. Certainly it seems to us that Laue understood this.

Of course, adopting methodological relativism cannot guarantee that the third-party's intervention will be productive, but the failure to do so will increase the odds against success. Nor is it necessary to pretend to believe that complete suspension of judgment is either desirable or possible in order to advocate methodological relativism. But the granting of full humanity to all parties to a dispute means that the outsider has to be prepared to accept that the actions of those parties are, by their own lights, reasonable and very often virtuous. It is notorious, in fact, that disputants' failure to make just this assumption about their opponents is what helps to make a dispute "intractable."

Illustrations of this point abound, especially in the annals of extreme ethnic and religious nationalism. These annals are filled with episode after episode in which resolution of outstanding issues was blocked by the failure of one or both of the parties to see their own metaphors clearly and their unthinking insistence on interpreting the other party's actions and statements according to their own cultural models.[6] Third-party intervention, which could bring the parties to see the role of their cultural blindness in creating or at least compounding the very situation that prevents them from coming to the table might well be useful. If the third-party is unaware of the cultural dimensions of his or her own model of being and action, however, this positive outcome is unlikely. Instead, because moral judgments are entailed by cultural models (and they always are, for culture is a moral system), the unthinking application of those models inevitably transforms recognition of difference into subjective evaluation of worth. This is inevitably what parties do to each other, and the third-party must first understand and then avoid the dynamics of this process if the parties are to be helped to the table.

And what of that newer understanding of culture mentioned above? How does it relate to this discussion of the importance of methodological cultural relativism for the practice of conflict resolution? Primarily, it helps avoid several errors typical of much analysis that passes itself off as culturally informed or culturally sensitive. Stereotyping—imputing uniformity where it does not exist—is one of those errors, and it results from the assumption that some identified cultural attribute must be shared by everyone. Helping parties "get to the table" often means recognizing that groups in conflict may contain a good deal of internal diversity. Frequently, that diversity maps onto social structure—a kind of grid across which culture is distributed. Social classes, for example, often are (sub)culturally distinct from one another.

Once we bring social structure into focus we are more easily able to "face" power (Wolf 1990), and to avoid the problem of some overly-mentalistic analyses of culture, in which talk about culture (by either the parties or the intervenor) serves to hide the operation of power (Gellner 1992:63). As Laue pointed out, blindness to power can cripple the search for social justice, and convert conflict resolution into a device for the maintenance of the status quo. Before developing that point, though, we must take up the question of whether cultural relativism is incompatible with a concern for social justice. Here, we address the second item in our typology: normative relativism.

VII Normative Relativism and Social Justice

Many more critiques of cultural relativism have been directed at the normative than at the methodological variety. It is in these attacks that some of the most egregious caricatures have been drawn. These caricatures typically portray "cultural relativists" as believing that because standards of ethics and morality vary from culture to culture, an all accepting, open-minded tolerance—indeed, indulgence—is the only possible moral stance. It is just a small step say the critics of this relativism, from normative relativism to moral nihilism (e.g., Manscreck 1976, Jarvie 1983, Gellner 1985).[7] However, not only is it very difficult if not impossible to locate an actual advocate of this extreme version of cultural relativism, there is nothing in either methodological or normative relativism which necessarily leads to taking that step.

One useful perspective to take on this question is to view cultural relativism, at least as it relates to normative standards, as a meta-ethical theory of enculturation, addressed to the grounding of moral perceptions in culturally specific learning (Rentlen 1988). In any event, extreme normative cultural relativism seems to be one of those positions that exists solely in the rhetoric mobilized against it.

There is, however, a weaker form of normative cultural relativism that we find persuasive. It goes like this: simply taking what all societies accept as right and wrong as the basis for an ethical system won't work because standards of right and wrong differ from society to society. In other words, a least common denominator approach to ethics is not an option—there is no least common denominator, or, if there is, it is so general as to offer no basis for making decisions and judgments.

Ethical systems must be derived from something other than simple inspection of the world ethnographic sample. We must stress that in our view there is no necessity to convert this point into the straw man of extreme normative relativism. Just because ethics cannot easily be derived from ethnology does not mean that a universal and/or absolute standard of judgment is beyond human reach. In fact, history contains a multitude of such systems of absolute standards. And there are certainly many sources besides the ethnographic record—religious traditions, the teachings of the sages, various moral philosophers. Despite the fact that these sources disagree with one another, history also demonstrates that large numbers of people have found one or another of these systems to be compellingly true.

The ethnographic archive does make it impossible on empirical grounds—the fact of cultural variability—for the advocates of any one moral system to legitimately claim that all societies do subscribe to the self-evident truth of that moral system. "Turn the other cheek" is a principle honored (if only in the breach) by many Christians. A quick reading of (for example) the literature on Yanomami politics demonstrates that not all societies are prepared to hold out this maxim as a guide to social action. Yet, empirical disconfirmation of claims of ethnographic universality cannot shake the foundations of the moral absolutes of one or another system. Moralities are not founded on disinterested empiricism, and are not subject to empirical disconfirmation.

There is something of a paradox here. While morality may be immune to empiricism, the very fact of cultural variability—the mere existence of other moral systems—can be experienced as threatening. Believers, that is, may conclude that their system's commandments about how people should and should not act are threatened simply because other systems, with different commandments, exist. Such a conclusion, though, rests on the rather curious belief (itself perhaps based on an all too human demand for cognitive consistency) that the validity of one's own system is dependent on its universal recognition and therefore the dismissal or even destruction of competing systems.[8]

But are there not such universals? Justice, it is sometimes claimed, is a cultural universal, recognized in every culture as a desirable end. As Richard Shweder has pointed out, though, this claim can only be sustained if an insubstantial definition of "justice" is adopted. "Treat like cases alike and different cases differently" can be taken as the rule for procedural justice (Shweder 1990:212). It may very well be true that this rule in one form or another is present in every society. The problem arises, however, when one tries to ascertain "alikeness." Deciding whether particular cases are like one another requires an ever-increasing input of content, much of it cultural.

Perhaps, it might be argued, "equity" can be made the core feature of a universal conception of justice. But Nader and Starr (1973:125) demonstrate how slippery that concept can be once one gets past the superficially comforting idea that, as they put it, "As with most general Western law concepts equity is probably present in some form and distributed in some way throughout all societies." When they examined ethnographically what equity actually means within and between different societies, the surface universalism disappeared. In fact, by the end of their article, Nader and Starr (1973:136) having examined equity in a number of different settings and connected it to the notion of distributive justice, conclude that, "Power is the key....[E]quity is not universal, but is dependent on time, place, and the restraints set against 'naked power' which the dominant members of society might use."

Time, place, definitions of alikeness and of restraints—this is the stuff of culture, its content. A content-less definition of justice (or of anything else) is very little help as a guide to action, including action designed to increase social justice by empowering outgroups so that they can come to the table able to defend themselves and their members. This, of course, was Jim Laue's concern. But Laue did not derive his concern with social justice from the claim that all cultures value justice. Laue in fact didn't worry about cultural variability at all in this connection: for him, the universality of justice was a claim derived more primordially from his doctrine of persons. Nevertheless, we would argue, such a claim is only defensible if justice is defined so broadly as to be practically meaningless—or, paradoxically, is defined narrowly, from within one moral tradition and then imposed on all others.

This is not a trivial point: definitions of justice matter. It is worth remembering that Father Coughlin, the notorious right-wing radio demagogue of 1920s America, called his newsletter "Social Justice" (Warren 1996). The politicians and ideologues who fed the flames of communal violence in former Yugoslavia talk of self-determination and cultural autonomy, values often included in the domain of social justice (Zupanov, Sekulic, and Sporer 1996). And the hate group militias on the fringes of current American politics appeal strongly to a sense of outraged justice on the part of their members (Southern Poverty Law Center 1996). Does normative relativism prevent us from distinguishing among these and other calls for social justice? Not at all. But it does mandate that the basis for making this or any other ethical judgment be something other than the ethnographic record. And, at least in its weaker form, normative relativism should make us cautious about rushing imperiously to presume that our own definition of justice is the universal one. Finally, normative relativism directs our attention reflexively and critically to the constitution of our own doctrines of person.

Both Laue and Nader and Starr end up grounding their discussion of justice on the idea of power. This is no coincidence. Here, we take up power in the context of the third type of cultural relativism, epistemological relativism. For power, in our view, is a universal presence, a "constant," in all human social worlds, much as gravity is a constant in the physical world. Power is thus unlike justice, equity or notions of right and wrong. Extreme epistemological relativists would deny the existence of this or any other constant.

VIII Epistemological Relativism and Empowerment

Epistemological relativism, like normative relativism, comes in a whole family of types, ranging from strong to weak, and from the literally unobjectionable (being simply a restatement of ethnographic observation) to the self-falsifying. The weak form recognizes that different cultures may frame reality in different ways: here, the dead walk on moonlit nights; there, certain stones are animate and willful; and somewhere else a guardian spirit is sought after, and actively directs a young person's life. In its strong form, epistemological relativism goes further and holds that any version of reality is as valid as any other—that no version of reality is to be epistemologically privileged over any other version. In its extreme form, epistemological relativism denies the existence of the "really real"—an absolute reality, over and above all of the variant cultural construals.

In its extreme form it is straw man. It is difficult to imagine anyone outside the pages of Carlos Castenada actually attempting to live according to the dictates of extreme epistemological relativism, choosing to regard gravity, for example, as "optional," a mere social convention.[9] As with extreme versions of normative relativism, much that passes for epistemological relativism has the quality of "shock art," cultural performances whose primary intent is to challenge the secure world of the bourgeoisie. Are we mistaken in believing that many of these positions are not really designed to be taken all that seriously and certainly not meant as a framework for social action? But what if social action, as in conflict resolution practice, is the goal?

We suspect that one would have a difficult time persuading even the most extreme relativist that the distressing propensity of airplanes suffering engine failure to drop from the sky was merely a social-cultural construction, and that whether or not the engines of the plane the relativist had just boarded had been competently inspected was of no interest. It might be objected that physical reality is one thing, social reality another—aspects of the physical world such as gravity one thing, aspects of social reality such as political power another set of things altogether. In other words, an argument about the possibilities of transforming a Volkswagen into a levitating hat may be a different enterprise than an argument about transforming hostile social relations into ones that are cooperative and mutually supportive. What if the action contemplated is not as simple as boarding a plane, but directed at resolving conflicts among people whose perceptions of reality, including social reality, may be quite different from one's own?

An answer to that question requires, first, the recognition that power unquestionably is culturally inflected. Just as there are different cultural models of the forces at work in the physical world (gravity here, levitation there) and the biological world (pathogens here, witchcraft there), so there are different understandings of the social world, including that dimension of the social world pointed to by the term "power." Furthermore, because people use their cultural knowledge about the social world in constructing and interpreting action, the way power is expressed in different societies can vary considerably. Finally, because of the well-known difficulty in escaping culturally constituted "common sense" when attempting to understand the social world, it is undoubtedly true that the so-called social scientific understanding of power is much further from a universally valid statement than the germ theory of disease, let alone Newton's formula for the gravitational constant. But it is a far cry from acknowledging cultural variation in the framing of power in different cultures—and acknowledging the analytical and practical importance of understanding that variation—to somehow losing entirely the concept of power to the vapors of extreme epistemological relativism.[10]

To illustrate the idea that a constant reality can be framed differently in different cultures (different worlds) let us for a moment pursue the analogy—and let us stress analogy—of power with gravity. Imagine a set of scales set up to show what a person would weigh on different worlds. First, the earth—

one's weight, as it is "really." But then the moon, and one weighs less. And then Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and (most striking of all), the Sun. One seems enormous on the Sun. But how could one's weight change so dramatically: isn't what one weighs a kind of baseline physical reality, a reflection of what really is? The solution to this puzzle can be found in elementary physics. "Weight" is not the relevant universal here; weight is not "conserved," mass is. Weight reflects mass, but mass as acted on by gravitational force—and the force of gravity differs from world to world.

Several pointers can be drawn from this analogy. First, search for the real underlying universals—mass, not weight, and the force called gravity. Secondly, imagine different worlds and investigate them. Finally, understand that so long as one lives on earth, the relevant measure of mass (the measure that all the rest of the scales on the world will record) will continue to be weight." So long as you never leave earth and its gravity, then, your weight can be taken to be a simple given. But to venture into other worlds is to profoundly unsettle that given and not just conceptually—"in your head." There are, as space medicine attests, real, not imagined, physical effects on the human body from living in altered gravity.

And the relevance of this analogy for investigations of the social-cultural world—and for acting in it, as in conflict resolution? So long as one remains inside the boundaries of one's native social world, then the naturalness, the constancy, the transparency—the givens—of that world seem obvious. To bring culture squarely into one's analysis is to imagine different worlds, and to study situations of intercultural contact is to investigate the effects of worlds—touching worlds—on social behavior. The analogy also points to the issue of relativism and universalism, indeed of "reality." It argues for the relevance of relativism and also for the relevance of the search for universals. It argues for a planet- or world-specific reality, but also for a transcending, universal reality. Most of all, it urges us to define the terms of all of our arguments very carefully, so we can disentangle one from another.

IX Conclusion

Jim Laue believed that conflict resolution must be put in the service of three core ethical values: empowerment, justice, and freedom. He was not much concerned by the problem of cultural relativism, since for him the universality of these values derived from his notion of human nature or, alternatively, from his doctrine of persons. In our discussion, we divided the omnibus notion of cultural relativism into three subtypes. Methodological relativism has to do with the suspension of one's own ethnocentrism for the purpose of understanding another culture. This, we argue, is crucial to all conflict analysis. In the concrete practice of conflict analysis, methodological relativism is crucial for the stage of the resolution process that Laue called "getting to the table," the prenegotiation stage.

Normative relativism is less self-recommending. We argue that a universal morality cannot be derived empirically from the ethnographic record, nor can it be so disconfirmed. Although normative relativity posed no problem for Laue, a weak form of normative relativism has the virtue of making problematic just what the analyst or intervenor takes for granted—that is, the universality of such ideas as freedom and (as we point out) justice. This is not to deny the possibility of their universality, but rather to make this possibility part of the larger negotiation project—part, in fact, of an enhanced "discovery" process that the analyst/intervenor ought to be engaging in. As to this latter point, a weak form of normative relativism forces the analyst/intervenor into a needed reflexivity about his or her own roles, assumptions, and metaphors. We will return to this point momentarily.

Finally, we argue that the strong form of epistemological relativism, which makes any version of reality as valid as any other, is not to be recommended at all. Not only is it self-burlesquing, but if it is used in

the arena of social activism it can be quite pernicious. This is because this form of relativism can blind analysts and intervenors to all sorts of "real-world" constraints, and most especially to the constraints of power. Here, then, we would agree wholeheartedly with Laue, who put "empowerment" at the center of his ethical system. But there, too, we would say that one must always be aware of local (cultural) inflections of power—an awareness that stems from a much weaker form of epistemological relativism.

The problem of cultural relativism arises most pointedly in situations of intercultural conflict, when normative or ethical systems that are not isomorphic come into play. The observation that values held by people are relative to the sociocultural context in which those values are learned, deployed, and modified, is neither new nor startling and by now seems beyond serious empirical dispute. When Laue wrote of the several and different intervenor roles—one of his other major concerns—he also set out, implicitly, different roles for an appreciation of cultural relativism. The activist, the enforcer, and the advocate need to be very sure of where they stand ethically. They must derive this ethic from a source external to the dispute—in Jim Laue's case, we believe, this was ultimately from a socially engaged Christianity. The role of the researcher and (we would argue) the mediator are more ambiguous. The researcher seeks out, investigates, other social worlds. The mediator must guard against unthinkingly imposing his or her definition of the world onto the parties. A serious consideration of issues raised by cultural relativism does not weaken Laue's analysis of third-party roles—it reinforces his view of the fundamental importance of power. Nor does it weaken a commitment to social justice; on the contrary, by making justice problematic it enhances our sense of the struggle necessary to attain it.[11]

Notes

[1] We wish to acknowlege the valuable help given by Howard Lasus and Barbara Webster Black in the preparation of this paper. We also thank the editors of this special edition for their invitation to join in this tribute to Jim Laue.

[2] That final clause should not be take as an invitation to a crassly utilitarian calculus. Nor is "The Good," whether common or not, always transparently obvious. Some agreed-upon metric is necessary for its definition. One important question to be addressed is, "What will that metric be?" As we point out in the discussion of normative relativism, the existence of culturally diverse normative systems implies the necessity of grounding that metric in something other than the ethnographic record. A further question that needs to be asked is "Whose metric?" In other words, "Who gets to define Laue's "common good"? And, as we point out in the section on epistemological relativism, the answer to that question requires an attention to power and its uses.

[3] We think it important to note that the focus on groups in this statement should not render their individual members invisible. The possibilities of conflict between those members, or of a discrepancy between the interests of particular individuals and the interests of their group should not be overlooked. With his wide experience in communal strife, especially in its ethnic and racial manifestations, Laue was certainly aware of these possibilities.

[4] Without entering into a full-blown history, it can be said that Franz Boas is usually regarded as the progenitor of cultural relativism in anthropology. He was reacting to the ethnocentric universalism of such 19th century social evolutionists as Edward Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Johann Bachofen. But anything theoretical remained largely implicit in Boas's work, and it fell to some of his students to make cultural relativism into an explicit anthropological doctrine. Melville Herskovits (1973) wrote mainly for fellow anthropologists, while Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead articulated the notion

for a wider public (especially Benedict 1934). It should also be said that these anthropologists were writing about and advocating what we have called methodological and normative relativism. Epistemological relativism crystallized in the work of the so-called symbolic anthropologists of the late 1960s-1970s, and developed fully in the recent postmodern period. Spiro (1986), Fernandez (1990), Renteln (1988), Edgerton (1992), and Hatch (1983) all contain interesting reviews of the history of this concept in anthropology. Adam Kuper gives a very thoughtful account of the intellectual ferment out of which the concepts of culture and of cultural relativity arose (1999).

5 That default definition also seems present in much of the discourse on such issues as "multiculturalism," "ethnic politics," and "political correctness." Largely unseen in the arguments and counter-arguments on these topics are competing ideas of just what is meant by culture and cultural differences. These arguments are taking place in a variety of arenas: academic (for example, Taylor 1992), popular (for example, Dresser 1996), and technical (for example, Curtis 1992). Much of the confusion in each of these literatures comes from the persistence of that default definition. Furthermore, it is possible to see the same kinds of confusion in the very instructive parallel controversies over cultural relativism surfacing in such disparate disciplines as linguistics (Hill 1992), psychiatry (Ryder 1987, Ewing 1991, Gaines 1992, Fabrega 1992, Santiago-Irizarry 1996), law (Bell 1994), economics (Wildavsky 1991, Hoksbergen 1994) and "big" history (Fukuyama 1999).

6 See Black and Avruch 1993 for an analysis of a less horrific but equally instructive history of the negotiations between the emerging Micronesian nation of Palau and the United States, its former Administrating Power under the United Nations. Those very difficult, long running, negotiations were bedeviled by, among other things, continual cultural blindness on both sides.

7 See Geertz 1984 for citations of and a response to many of the more outlandish of these claims.

8 Another and more pernicious fallacy lies in converting the observation of what "is" into an ethical commandment as to how one "ought" to behave. For example, and despite a good deal of generous spirited rhetoric to the contrary, tolerance (an ethical stance) is not logically mandated by the fact of ethnographic diversity in and of itself.

9 Here of course the scandalous hoax at Social Text, a leading postmodernist journal, comes to mind. The credulity of the editors in unwittingly publishing the physicist Alan Sokal's spoof of much of what passes for breakthrough interdisciplinarity (Sokal 1996) has been much remarked. Yet their error, and the attention it has received, has had the salutory effect of bringing a good deal of clarity to otherwise obscured issues. See especially Steven Weinberg's 1996 article reviewing the affair. He details his efforts to determine whether or not those espousing a postmodernist view of science were necessarily what we have called extreme epistemological relativists. According to him, they don't think they are. He thinks they are as wrong about this as they are about science. For the next (though surely not the last) word on all this see Sokal and Brilmont 1998.

10 See Geertz (1980:134-136) for a sense of the different framing of power in Bali's 19th century "theatre state," and then see Gellner (1992:69) for the critical reflection that, in the end, this was a "theatre" based on coercion.

11 An important related topic to which the present essay can be seen as prologue is the relation between cultural variability, cultural relativism, and the notion of universal human rights. Here is a substantial literature on this topic, much of it anthropological. See Cohen (1989), Cohen et al. (1993), Renteln (1990), Shute and Hurley (1993), Steiner and Alston (1996), Washburn (1987).

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