

RESPONSE

"WHO OWNS 'CULTURE'?"<sup>1</sup>

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This title could be interpreted in two different ways: as a criticism of McCauley and Lawson's article "Who owns 'culture'?" (1996) or as an answer to the question "Who owns 'culture'?". My intention is connected to the latter; however, I will try to emphasize another response to the question "Who owns 'culture'?", one greatly inspired by (and compatible with) their own article. In doing so, I intend to explicate something that they only implicitly suggest.

To achieve this, I propose a taxonomy of epistemological positions focusing on anthropology's claim of being the proprietor of 'culture'.<sup>2</sup> To construct this taxonomy, I will define some general semantic traits and, by crossing them, start to delineate the positions.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Semantic traits*

1. (a) Isolationism X (b) Non-Isolationism

What is at stake here is the possibility of intertheoretic relations between the social/cultural sciences and the natural sciences.<sup>4</sup>

1(a) There are no possible intertheoretic relations between the social/cultural sciences and the natural sciences.

1(b) The possibility of such relations.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Thomas Lawson, Robert McCauley, and Russell McCutcheon for their helpful comments and encouragement. Following Lawson and McCauley, I refer to concepts by enclosing the corresponding terms for the concepts in single quotation marks. Thus, 'culture' refers to the concept of culture.

<sup>2</sup> The intellectual background of this taxonomy can be found in Boyer 1993, 1994; Cosmides and Tooby, 1992; Lawson and McCauley 1990, 1996; McCauley (forthcoming); Sousa 1994, and Sperber 1985, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> So, in a technical sense, it will not be a taxonomy but a paradigm (see Tylor 1969: 6-12). Here I am using the term taxonomy in the loose sense of classification.

<sup>4</sup> By "intertheoretic relations" I mean the relations of elimination, reduction, and unification between theories; the natural sciences most relevant here are psychology and biology.

## 2. (a) Interpretivism X (b) Non-Interpretivism

What is at stake here is a rigid methodological distinction between the social/cultural sciences and the natural sciences.

2(a) The social/cultural sciences are exclusively interpretive and anti-theoretical, that is, they must seek only particular interpretations.

2(b) The possibility of general/explanatory knowledge within the social/cultural sciences.

## 3. (a) Relativism X (b) Non-Relativism

What is at stake here is the possibility of science.

3(a) It is not possible to justify rationally our beliefs, that is, knowledge is not possible.

3(b) The possibility of scientific knowledge.

A very important remark: the term "relativism" is used frequently with two (not necessarily linked) meanings: (i) the anti-theoretical dimension of interpretivism, that is, the rejection of general theories; (ii) the denial of the possibility of knowledge, be it general/theoretical or particular. Here I am using "relativism" only with the latter meaning.

2. *Positions*

By crossing the semantic traits, we have eight positions:

[A] 1(a),2(b),3(b): Isolationism, non-interpretivism, non-relativism

[B] 1(a),2(a),3(b): Isolationism, interpretivism, non-relativism

[C] 1(a),2(a),3(a): Isolationism, interpretivism, relativism

[D] 1(b),2(b),3(b): Non-isolationism, non-interpretivism, non-relativism

[E] 1(a),2(b),3(a): Isolationism, non-interpretivism, relativism

[F] 1(b),2(a),3(a): Non-isolationism, interpretivism, relativism

[G] 1(b),2(a),3(b): Non-isolationism, interpretivism, non-relativism

[H] 1(b),2(b),3(a): Non-isolationism, non-interpretivism, relativism

These eight positions notwithstanding, I am going to consider only (and in a sketchy manner) the ones that seem to me the most intelligible and relevant to my following reply.

2.1 [A] 1(a), 2(b), 3(b): *Isolationism, non-interpretivism, non-relativism*

Position "[A]" denies relativism, does not argue that there is a rigid methodological distinction between the social/cultural and the natu-

ral sciences, but affirms the fundamental protectionism of the birth of the social sciences: "The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness" (Durkheim 1962: 110).

Social/cultural scientists of this position use analytical strategies and pursue the kind of general/explanatory knowledge of the natural sciences, but they think that the substantive claims of these sciences are not relevant to explain socio-cultural phenomenon. As far as ontology is concerned, there seems to exist an implicit denial of the causal interdependency of the world—socio/cultural phenomenon have an emergentist causal autonomy.

In sociology, this comprises the position generally held by those in the Durkheimian tradition. In anthropology, it corresponds mainly to what McCauley and Lawson say about the "traditional ontological and methodological presuppositions of anthropology" (1996: 172). These traditional theses are the cultural version of the isolationist postulate. Here, for example, is an anthropologist's endorsement: "culture is a thing *sui generis* which can be explained only in terms of itself . . . *Omnis cultura ex cultura*" (Lowie 1966: 66).

## 2.2 [B] 1(a), 2(a), 3(b): *Isolationism, interpretivism, non-relativism*

Position "[B]" denies relativism, maintains isolationism, but argues that there is a rigid methodological distinction.

Anthropologists of this position prefer to see their inquiry as interpretive instead of analytical and explanatory. They do not pursue the kind of general knowledge so akin to the natural sciences. Their exclusive aim is to give interpretations of extremely idiosyncratic cultural meanings. As far as ontology is concerned, there seems to be the supposition of the existence of special types of non-causal objects—cultures are intrinsically holistic, extremely variable and of a semiotic character.

This is the position held by most authors of the "hermeneutic turn" in anthropology, as in Clifford Geertz's defense of an interpretive science (Geertz 1973).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Dan Sperber, in his important discussions of interpretation in anthropology (1985, 1996), addresses the issue of interpretive generalizations. Even if the epistemological status of these generalizations is dubious—as he convincingly argues—in the context of my taxonomy, anthropologists who *defend* the pursuit of interpretive *generalizations*, not assuming therefore an anti-theoretical perspective, do not enter into this position.

2.3 [C] 1(a), 2(a), 3(a): *Isolationism, interpretivism, relativism*

Position "[C]" maintains isolationism, maintains interpretivism, but defends relativism.<sup>6</sup>

Anthropologists of this position claim that the aim of their inquiry is not scientific at all: it has more to do with aesthetics and politics. As far as ontology is concerned, there seems to be an idealist denial of the autonomy of the external world—reality exists, but it is not independent from human beings; more precisely, realities exist, each one dependent on (and determined by) each human culture or subculture.

This is a position often held by authors of the "post-modernist turn" in anthropology (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986).

2.4 [D] 1(b), 2(b), 3(b): *Non-isolationism, non-interpretivism, non-relativism*

Position "[D]" aims to do science, denies a rigid methodological distinction, and defends the pursuit of intertheoretic relations. As far as ontology is concerned, there seems to be the supposition of the external independence of the world, of its causal interdependency, and the denial of the existence of special types of non-causal objects.

There are various versions of this position: for instance, in cognitive research there is the work of Cosmides, Boyer, Lawson, McCauley, Sperber, and Tooby; we even find it in sociobiology, among methodological individualists, and represented in the work of such anthropologists as Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss.<sup>7</sup>

3. *The response*

McCauley and Lawson say correctly:

Throughout its century-long struggle for academic respectability, anthropology has regularly insisted on its *unique* role as the proprietor of

<sup>6</sup> For this position to be a coherent one, the interpretation of the word "science" that appears in traits 1 and 2 must imply simply scientific beliefs.

<sup>7</sup> A last remark about my taxonomy: I have tried to envisage logical relationships between semantic traits and to delineate some ideal-type positions; the exemplification of the positions has to do more with some explicit epistemological claims made by social/cultural scientists, whether or not they pursue them coherently. Therefore, I assume neither that the practice of social/cultural scientists is always coherent with their epistemological claims, nor that their epistemological claims are always well articulated. In fact, it is not unusual the oscillation between the four described positions (or even the assumption of the other curious positions "[E]", "[F]", "[G]", and "[H]").

'culture'. Its variety of approaches and feuding factions notwithstanding, it is this proprietary claim that unifies anthropology to an extent sometimes unrecognized even by its own (post-modernist) practitioners. (1996: 171-172)

I tend to interpret the proprietary claim that unifies anthropology as a general defense of "1(a)".<sup>8</sup> One of the reasons is the compatibility of this interpretation with my taxonomy; that is, anthropologists of positions "[A]", "[B]", and "[C]" have in common the semantic trait "1(a)":

[A] 1(a),2(b),3(b): Isolationism, non-interpretivism, non-relativism

[B] 1(a),2(a),3(b): Isolationism, interpretivism, non-relativism

[C] 1(a),2(a),3(a): Isolationism, interpretivism, relativism

The other reason is that, when McCauley and Lawson talk about other relevant disciplines and evidences to the study of culture (see 1996: part IV), they say:

Probably no consideration *more clearly* reveals the emptiness of cultural anthropology's proprietary claims than the fact that other disciplines have developed means for investigating the world that bear directly on how we conceive of culture. . . . These other types of biological, psychological, social inquiry have revealed new ways to approach the topics of culture and cultural forms from angles unlike those typically employed in cultural anthropology. (1996: 178; emphasis, mine)

This is the point that is clearly connected (and more relevant) to anthropology's proprietary claim, and this point seems to be about intertheoretic relations—in this case, against isolationism.

Now I can try to go directly to my response. Let me do that by quoting McCauley and Lawson again:

The most general implication (of the hermeneutic approach) reveals an important and suggestive asymmetry between the story that this version of anthropology tells about itself and the stories the other social sciences tell about themselves. (1996: 175-176)

This asymmetry, explored in the third part of their article, can be represented via my taxonomy: they are saying that hermeneuts, being interpretivists, defend an extremely holistic and anti-theoretical perspective. In this way, they can deny the position of other social/cultural scientists who, being non-interpretivists, apply the methodo-

<sup>8</sup> Expressions such as "isolationism", "protectionism", and "proprietary claim" function to a certain extent as metaphors that evoke attitudinal characteristics of those who defend the semantic trait "1(a)".

logical strategies of analysis and construction theories derived from the natural sciences.<sup>9</sup> Having in mind my taxonomy, this is an immediate implication: position “[B]” differs from position “[A]” just by the opposite traits “2(a)” and “2(b)”.

There is another less immediate implication that seems to be only implicitly suggested by their article. This can be easily seen when we have in mind the following semantic relations between the traits:

1(b) → 2(b): the negation of isolationism implies non-interpretivism, for intertheoric relations with the natural sciences can only be traced at a general/theoretical level and interpretivism does not envisage the possibility of such a level.

2(a) → 1(a): the defense of interpretivism implies isolationism, that is, if you do not envisage the possibility of general theories, you deny the possibility of intertheoretic relations with the natural sciences.

2(b) → 1(a) or 1(b): the negation of interpretivism can be combined with either isolationism or non-isolationism.

Thus, if the isolationist claim of anthropology is implied by interpretivism and not implied by non-interpretivism, there is a marked logical difference between anthropologists (and other social scientists) of position “[A]” and anthropologists of position “[B]”: while the former are only one epistemological step away from the denial of isolationism, the latter are two steps away from its denial; while the former have only to abandon the *a priori* isolationist postulate, the latter have first to abandon their interpretivist commitment. And, from the additional distinction between positions “[B]” and “[C]”, it is worthwhile noting that, for anthropologists of position “[C]” to reach the level of intertheoretic relations, first of all they have to recover a disposition to climb the scientific ladder.

And this is what I want to emphasize by means of my taxonomy: the isolationist claim of anthropologists may have different kinds of epistemological commitments, in other words, anthropologists own ‘culture’ with different types of monetary resources.

Now I can demonstrate the existence of an ambiguity that will help to clarify both the difference and the compatibility (initially mentioned) between McCauley and Lawson’s paper and my own. In the context of this discussion, the question “Who owns ‘culture?’”

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Lawson and McCauley use the term “hermeneutics” for positions “[B]” and “[C]”. My distinction and their conflation are totally justified by the different aims of our papers.

can have two different interpretations—one descriptive and the other normative: (i) “Who has the supposition of proprietorship of ‘culture?’”; (ii) “Who has the epistemological right to be the proprietor of ‘culture?’”.

McCauley and Lawson’s article emphasizes the normative question, and it therefore criticizes anthropology’s supposition of being the sole proprietor of ‘culture’. Their critique thereby opens a space for intertheoretic relations: “we advise at least placing it [‘culture’] in the public domain. We aim to contest the notion that anthropology either owns ‘culture’ or is capable of its purchase solely with the coin of the interpretive realm” (1996: 174-175). However, my reply has been almost entirely concerned with the descriptive question: I have delineated in some detail different ideal-types concerning who has the supposition of being the proprietor of ‘culture’. Because my position relative to the normative question was only insinuated, let me finish by making it explicit by underwriting McCauley and Lawson’s position: No one owns ‘culture’.

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