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Social anthropology within the context of the social sciences - cultural diversity and the educational process

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Cultural relativism

Social anthropology is still a relatively young social science. Studies of 'other' societies, particularly of those less technologically developed, began in 1922 with Bronislaw Malinowski. These relied on a methodology of precise analysis: that is direct observation available from fieldwork. Since that time Anthropology - studying the organisation of human societies - has attempted to examine the enormous variety of peoples that coexist throughout the world.

Although social anthropology began as a science basing itself on the study of the erroneously named 'primitive societies', anthropologists have for some time now begun to focus their studies on their own societies. Relying on the comparative method - that is comparing various previous studies and arriving at conclusions based on the many different forms in which human groups organise themselves to live, be it in politics, families, religions or economy - anthropology arrives at the general concept of cultural diversity, or cultural relativism.

The emphasis placed on the scientific generalisation of cultural relativism by anthropology runs counter to more radically ethnocentric theories and ideologies - such as certain racist, xenophobic, colonialist or religious ideologies, which have created some of the darkest pages of human history. In this way anthropologists have noted differences between various societies while avoiding favouring one over another.

Ideas of cultural diversity have not only been used to indicate the existence of different forms of social organisation. Within a single society the manner in which people live differs depending on, for example, whether they live in an urban or rural area, or whether one belongs to a certain gender, class, profession or religion. With increasing globalisation we have come to observe an economic homogeneity throughout the world, but it is also true that human societies have become increasingly multicultural. This new world, identified through the metaphor of the 'global village' with its new possibilities in information and communication, is becoming ever more an immense net of multicultural spaces, where one should be able to identify strong asymmetries in development between countries and regions. Today, as in earlier times, we observe economic powers reproduce former relationships of power, coexisting with the politics of exclusion and a new colonial dominance of vast areas of the world.

Similarly, a contemporary working understanding of such concepts as cultural diversity, cultural relativism, and multiculturalism by social sciences should contribute towards greater closeness between peoples, giving rise to effective policies within the area of human rights, creating chances for greater equality in the distribution of wealth, reducing differences between rich and poor en route to greater social justice and reducing the effects of racial and religious intolerance in a peaceful demonstration of living together.

The Educational Process

The educational process is a key part of any social structure. All human societies have in themselves an educational system that represents the backbone of social development. Through education culture is transmitted from one individual to another, from one generation to the next. The long period involved in growing up has no other purpose than to complete the physical and mental structures of the child, relative to the society in which it will live - that is, to address the specific needs that society imposes upon the individual.

The educational process conditions the child to fit into the group to which it belongs, giving it at the same time the abilities it will need in order to survive. From the time it is born the child learns social distinctions through its ever growing social groups: the domestic group, the family, neighbours, peer groups in or out of school, via the prevailing means of communication. The educational process, therefore, should be seen as the handing down of a collective memory.

Still using the comparative method, of social anthropology, we can compare in a general way the different characteristics that the educational process assumes when one analyses more traditional societies, or when one when one looks at modern societies.

In traditional societies

- the educational process is often conducted orally;
- it is, first and foremost genealogy and hierarchy that determine an individual's place within the web of social relations; and
- there are initiation groups separate from the family where young people are trained in various activities, each learning part of the collective knowledge.

Here the educational process is more practical and less confrontational.

In modern societies

- only a part of group knowledge is transmitted orally (through family, neighbours etc.);
- new group members are removed from their homes to be taught writing, reading and mathematics, in order to gain suitable qualifications; and
- children are separated from their parents early in their life to be connected to teaching and removed from their everyday routine. The teacher is responsible for imparting knowledge to the next generation.

This educational process is less practical, and more confrontational.

Conclusion

The educational process is directly linked to cultural life, and is extremely strong. On the one hand there is the subordination of the individual to the group and its norms; on the other it prepares new members of society to replace those who have passed away, but whose abilities need to be kept within the collective memory. School and teachers consist of those who attempt to unify history and culture in order to achieve progress. The teacher is part of the process that seeks to erase cultural memory, imparting new knowledge to pupils.

Social anthropology reveals that the cultural experience of each child, acquired from its peers, seems to be 'something to be forgotten' once they begin school. It is somewhere within the child's imaginary world, among its games and pranks in accordance to each child's respective cultural matrix, and the abstract worlds of grammar and mathematics, that we should place ourselves. We need to pay attention to the confrontation between children's own cultural world and school.

There is a transfer apparent within the educational process today, from the family to the school. At the same time one can observe the growing importance of questions arising from globalisation, with schools that are increasingly multicultural. In recent years we have been faced with a whole new set of topics related to the ever-growing diversity of schools: more multicultural classes, the importance of success or not in school, greater equality in access to school and to knowledge for children of different social classes, and, subsequently, to the work market.

The need for a constant reorganisation of the school system has become an absolute necessity. We need to be guided by human rights, the dignity of the individual, the search for a better quality of life and the awareness of a collective consciousness.

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