THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE INVERTED: RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN THE PORTRAYAL OF CULTURES IN RUTH BENEDICT'S *PATTERNS OF CULTURE* AND MARGARET MEAD'S *SEX AND TEMPERAMENT IN THREE PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES*

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Patterns of Culture and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, published a year apart, have a startlingly parallel structure. Discussions of anthropological method open both; the question of the individual and deviance closes both. The triad of cultures in each book is arranged in the order of "the good, the bad, and the inverted." The first culture emphasizes cooperation and nurturance, the second competition and discord. The third culture in each inverts some feature of Western society, either in the economic realm (Kwakiutl) or in that of gendered personality (Tchambuli). Cultural inversion places Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead in a rhetorical tradition of social critique. Nevertheless, the cultural relativism shown by these contrasts is not philosophically "strong" relativism and does not rely on a "blank slate" view of human nature. Specifically, the concept of temperament includes, not excludes, biology; culture selects the expression of temperament. While not all in the books may be universally accepted today, their approach repays a second look.

Two Books in Parallel

PATTE RNS OF CULTURE by Ruth Benedict and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* by Margaret Mead were published within a year of each other. Both are written in a literary style, which in both cases attracted a wide readership outside anthropological circles. Both texts open with an elucidation of the anthropological subject matter and of anthropological investigation. In Mead, this discussion occupies a short introduction; in Benedict, three chapters. The purpose of these extended discussions is partly to familiarize outsiders with the purposes of anthropology; they are also manifestos aimed at contemporary anthropological ideas and practice. The main body

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of both works consists of an examination in detail of a triad of cultures, each considered as an integrated whole. The penultimate chapter of each book contains a discussion of how cultures are and become patterned. In Benedict this question is considered in its general significance, whereas in Mead it is considered only as it bears on the specific question of, as she termed it, "sex-difference" (Mead [1935] 1950: xii; in today's terms, gender). The last chapter in each book deals with the question of the relation of the individual to society; both books discuss deviance as central to this issue. And both books conclude with an exhortation to our own society to widen its perspectives.

The two works show a remarkable parallelism as structural wholes. But they further resemble each other in their examination of specific cultures. There is a provocative parallel between the sequence of Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli as discussed by Mead and that of Pueblo, Dobu, and Kwakiutl described by Benedict. When I first noticed this parallel, having read these books as a student, my mental phrasing of it was that in each triad the first culture was a nice one, the second a nasty one, and the third an artistic one by a body of water. Upon further reflection, what I found interesting about the third cultures in each triad was how these invert American culture in a significant way. I shall argue that this seeming coincidence between the two books not only argues for influence, but, more significantly, it follows from the common rhetorical purpose of both authors—to expose their readers to cultural relativism in both an intellectually and emotionally convincing manner, and by doing so to give them insight into the culturally relative nature of their own ways of life.

This cultural relativism begins with a sense of the wide range of possible cultural difference. The books further demonstrate, by comparison, that cultures differ widely, not only in their institutions, but also in other, harder to define, ways. Each culture possesses a characteristic complex of feeling associated with the way its participants experience and perpetuate their cultural institutions. A number of anthropologists have used the term ethos for this, Mead (probably following Gregory Bateson) among them (Mead [1935] 1950:236).[1] Ethos of this kind also seems to be a component of what Benedict refers to as a culture's pattern or configuration (Benedict [1934] 1959:55), which includes cognitive aspects of the culture's structure as well. I discuss these terms in more depth in a later section of this paper, one which shows how Gregory Bateson, in his 1936 book *Naven*, dissected the differences between these concepts. These ethoses, patterns, or configurations can be sharply different even among closely related cultures, and they seem to be able to vary with few inherent limits.

I will also return below to the question of how relativistic Benedict and Mead actually were, and what their relativisms portended. I will argue, for example, that Mead and Benedict were not philosophical or epistemological

relativists. Their use of concepts such as temperament actually involved a subtle sense of the interrelationships between the innate and the individual (which are not, of course, totally identical) and the wider cultural patterns that participate in shaping these. In spite of current critiques, they were far from "blank slate" theorists.[2] However, they were relativists in the sense that they wished to generate, for their American audience, a rich sense of human potential, for good and ill, and to illustrate this range of human potential they used a strategy of contrasts in cultural patterns.

As I examine the ways cultures are portrayed in Mead's and Benedict's books, my descriptions of their descriptions will seem oversimplified and schematic. This is due in part to the authors' own tendencies to use light and shadow in their portrayals of the various cultures they studied. They were further constrained in presenting complex cultural material in an abbreviated fashion, in which contrasts had to be strongly stated in order for the ideas embedded in those contrasts to make an impact on a wider public.

But in spite of their clear rhetorical purpose, and their tendency to encapsulate cultures in order to contrast them, Benedict and Mead attempted to ground their examples on what they saw as sound and accurate ethnographic work. Although the ethnographic underpinnings of the two books have faced criticism, it is noteworthy that they are not without their defenders. For Benedict's triad of cultures, the portrait of the Pueblo peoples, particularly Zuni, was the one most dependent on her own fieldwork. The fundamental soundness of much of Benedict's Zuni data was allowed by a number of researchers, including some unsympathetic to her larger approach, including Robert Lowie (1938) and Elsie Clews Parsons (1939). This, along with some of the criticisms of her interpretations, is discussed in detail in Caffrey's biography (1989: 217–240). For Mead's Sepik work, Lipset (2003) has made the strongest case that her portraits of the societies she studied retain a significant measure of validity—even after a half century of restudy and critical reassessment. Lipset's article comprehensively reviews both the contemporary and subsequent ethnographic work on what he calls Mead's "triptych" of cultures. Nevertheless, I will reiterate that it is not in any way the purpose of this article to argue for the ethnographic accuracy of any specific portrayal of a culture by Benedict or Mead. Nor do I argue for the revival of their particular style of broad-brush cultural comparison—even if I do make the case that the view of culture they underwrite with such comparison is one that deserves another look.

The Two Triads: The Good, the Bad ...

The first culture of each triad, or triptych, Zuni/ Dobu/ Kwakiutl and Arapesh/ Mundugumor/ Tchambuli, is described as one in which the virtues

of social solidarity and cooperation are emphasized at the expense of individual self-assertion. The Pueblo Zuni and Mountain Arapesh share, in their respective portrayals, a de-emphasis of assertive leadership as a trait of the ideal individual. Rather, social energies are directed toward the cooperative maintenance of life, the bringing of rain or the "growing" of yams and children (Mead [1935] 1950:24–25). Both sexes participate in the care of children. Even the initiation rites of these peoples are not phrased as "unloading upon the children the adult's ... will to power" (Benedict [1934] 1959:103). Rather, these rites are described as a way of establishing novices as properly dutiful and cooperative members of society. War and conflict are rare among both the Zuni and the Mountain Arapesh. Ruth Benedict describes the pursuit of warfare among the Zuni as part of the promotion of fertility and social harmony, in contrast with the "Dionysian" way it is celebrated among Plains Indians. Margaret Mead describes war as rare to nonexistent among the Mountain Arapesh, in contrast to Fortune's documentation of Arapesh warfare (see also Roscoe 2003). Arguably, Mead could have more defensibly stated her point that the Arapesh were less warlike than their neighbors in the regional context. Zuni and Arapesh "deviants" would be those with violent or even passionate temperaments, or those who desire to maximize their personal property or status.

Some of the deviants of Arapesh or Zuni, as they are portrayed, would find Dobu or Mundugumor quite congenial.[3] These latter cultures are described by Benedict and Mead in ways which would seem to ensure that few American readers would find either culture sympathetic. Both societies pit individuals against each other, although Mundugumor hostility is portrayed as perhaps more open than Dobu treachery. Both emphasize individual self-assertion in a world conceived as a life-and-death, cutthroat, competitive struggle in which gains for one are inevitably losses for another. Leadership is charismatic and informal, respected because leaders get goods for themselves. In the Dobu case overt display is feared, but "sharp practice," for example, in *kula* trading is admired, as is the use of witchcraft to augment one's own goods at the expense of others. Sex is passionately and violently erotic, but not tender; tension between sex partners is strong, while bonds between parents and children are weak. The deviants in Mundugumor and Dobu societies, according to their portrayals in Mead's and Benedict's respective books, would be those who did not fight or scheme for their own advantage, but rather those who cared about others and were kind to them.

The contrast between the first and second cultures in each triad is presented as one between extremes. Such a contrast is appropriate if the purpose of both books is to expose readers to the wide range of cultural variability. Not only American anthropologists, but Americans in general, have

long been interested in the individual. What better contrast, then, than one between cultures in which the individual is subordinate to society, as opposed to cultures in which the individual is paramount, even at the expense of social harmony. Mead and Benedict alike emphasize that these contrasting emphases of culture produce contrasting types of person. Mead's specific interest in similarities and differences in temperament between the sexes (or genders) of particular cultures does not prevent her from echoing Benedict's more general cultural comparison. Both are facilitated by making the contrast between the first two cultures in each triad stark and vivid.

...And the Inverted

The third cultures of Mead's and Benedict's respective triads, Tchambuli and Kwakiutl, do not resemble each other as much as do Arapesh and Pueblo, or Dobu and Mundugumor. Both third cultures, it is true, were non-farming peoples who did not have to concern themselves much with a struggle for survival. The Tchambuli are portrayed as largely living off the proceeds of the mosquito nets the women made, while the Kwakiutl famously built a complex culture on the nonagricultural foundation of bountiful salmon runs. Both peoples are thus portrayed as having had ample opportunity to develop and emphasize aspects of life not directly connected to subsistence, namely richly developed artistic and ritual traditions. However, in terms of Mead's and Benedict's rhetorical purpose, these two cultures appear to invert our own in some respect, and it is this inversion or mirror image that warrants their inclusion in the authors' respective triads. While theoretically, Tchambuli men rule over women, the latter exhibit qualities Western society considers manlike; whereas Tchambuli men exhibit so-called "feminine" characteristics, according to 1930's American stereotypes.[4] Similarly, Kwakiutl economic competition—although much like our own in giving prestige to wealth—does not lend prestige, as ours does, to the acquisition and use of goods, the consumerist competition to "keep up with the Joneses" in conspicuous consumption. Instead, through the institution of the potlatch, the Kwakiutl give their competitive accolade to those who are able to distribute wealth generously as gifts, and even, sometimes, to destroy it ostentatiously, in both cases shaming their rivals into having to do the same. (Perhaps this could be called conspicuous distribution and conspicuous destruction.)

The rhetorical purpose of inversion in these portrayals has not been as widely discussed as the earlier contrast seen between "nice" and "nasty" cultures. For example, while Banner (2003a, 2003b) has clearly identified the portrayals of Zuni and Arapesh as being sympathetic, she places the last two members of both triads in the category of those who are portrayed as unsym-

pathetic. Indeed, Benedict's representation of rather boastful, vainglorious, and sometimes ritually cannibalistic Kwakiutl male claimants to greatness may be arguably closer to a negative portrayal than is Mead's ambiguous contrasting of touchy and insecure male Tchambuli artists with solid, economically productive, grounded and empowered Tchambuli females. But this should not obscure the fact that what we are dealing with here is a second set of contrasts. While the first set of contrasts (between the first and second members of each triad) opposes sympathetic, socially integrative cultures to unsympathetic, individualistic, and (if such a thing can exist) antisocial societies, the second pair of contrasts (between the third cultures of each triad and our own) foregrounds the features of the other culture which can best serve as an inversionary looking-glass vis-a-vis the intended reader's.

Inversion is a time-tested method of challenging a prevailing culture's unreflective sense of itself, and it has been used in philosophy and literature to examine what would later be considered as contrasts among cultures–often with a view to satirizing one's own. Indeed, inversion resulting from cultural displacement that produces a new view of taken-for-granted social realities has numerous literary precursors, and I will mention a few in the Western tradition. Such inversion is sometimes called "Swiftian" because Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* ([1726] 1956) famously uses it as a motif in a number of ways. The Houyhnhnms are horses with the power of reason, while the Yahoos are humans without reason. The civil wars of Lilliput are based on the religious difference between cracking an egg at the big end or the smaller end. Swift's 18th-century contemporary, Montesquieu, used fictional Persian observers to lampoon European culture in his *Persian Letters* ([1721] 1899). Contrast and difference were again used to satirical and theoretical purpose and to animate cultural reflection. Samuel Butler, one of Gregory Bateson's favorite authors, perfected the use of inversion as cultural critique in his utopian, or dystopian, novel *Erewhon* (1923).[5] In that novel, a protagonist not unlike Samuel Butler himself, who at one time was a New Zealand sheep farmer, decided to travel to the forbidden inland country located beyond the frontiers of a placid land much like New Zealand. He discovered in the interior land of Erewhon, an anagram of Nowhere, that illness is treated as a criminal offense with sick people thrown into jail, while robbery or murder is treated in the hospital. Universities specialize in unreason, considering its deployment to be more useful than that of reason. A survey of the world's literature would find many more examples of the use of inversion as a rhetorical device, which makes either a satirical or utopian point of provoking a challenge to the reader's presumed ideas about the natural order of things.

Such a challenge is perhaps one of the most salient pedagogical uses of the anthropological concept of culture, and by provoking the minds of read-

ers this use of contrast may have helped them grasp the intended relativist framework of the anti-establishmentarian Boasian school. The use of inversion in this sense is perhaps an under-appreciated rhetoric of anthropology. One could argue that inversion is even at the root of theoretical positions such as Lévi-Strauss' structuralism ([1964] 1975). In the case of Mead's and Benedict's works, inversion is intended to make us aware that our customs are only customs and are not inherent in the nature of things. The authors' rhetorical purpose is facilitated in both *Patterns of Culture* and in *Sex and Temperament* by making the third culture in each triad one that inverts a key American cultural pattern. Thus, Kwakiutl potlatches in Benedict's description invert the American capitalist "game" of accumulation and possession, in that display and prestige on the Northwest Coast are linked to giving away wealth rather than keeping it. Similarly, for Mead, the Tchambuli are found to invert, not so much Western sex roles as such, but rather the personality patterns that accompany them. Men pursuing culturally masculine Tchambuli goals are seen by Mead as nevertheless feminine in their style of doing so; while confident women go about their possibly less prestigious (but more materially important) tasks in what Mead sees as a masculine manner, dominating the males in so doing.

The use of a concept of rhetoric to analyze these two books is not meant as a way of diminishing their seriousness as works that Benedict and Mead clearly intended as contributions to scientific scholarship as they conceived of it.[6] Indeed, their deployment of cultural contrasts in terms of the double opposition I propose here is not incompatible with a serious or scientific purpose, since these books demonstrated the variability of cultures to anthropologists as well as to the public. All human language is in some sense potentially rhetoric; that is, rhetoric is one valid method of looking at all human utterances—which is not to say that it is the only method of looking at any of them. Thus, by using a concept of rhetoric, I do not mean to undermine the theoretical significance of Mead's and Benedict's analyses in terms of the anthropology of their time.

Keeping in mind these rhetorical and analytic purposes, it is reasonable to ask to what extent the cultures in either book were consciously chosen to exemplify the contrasts they do. For Ruth Benedict, such a conscious choice of cultures is implied rather than stated overtly in *Patterns of Culture*. Her idea of the cultural diversity of "primitives" as a laboratory (Benedict [1934] 1959:17–18), combined with her view of the particular cultures discussed in the book as being better exemplars of cultural integration than others (Benedict [1934] 1959:223), together support the idea that she selected these cultures to facilitate contrast. But this selection would pose no special problem for her method, since Benedict did not limit herself to cultures she herself had studied.

On the other hand, Margaret Mead chose all the cultures in *Sex and Temperament* from her own fieldwork, based on one extended field visit to the East Sepik region of New Guinea. In her preface to the 1950 edition, Mead ([1935] 1950:vii–viii) notes that skeptical readers might find it "too much" and "too pretty" that cultures which maintain such a neat set of contrasts should be found so close together within one cultural region. She suspects such skeptics of assuming that she visited New Guinea with her thesis in mind and then shaped the facts to fit it. In fact this does not appear to have been the case. Her choice of particular Sepik cultures to study was the result of a number of remarkably improbable circumstances, and she does not seem to have come up with the thesis of *Sex and Temperament* until late in her New Guinea field visit, and afterwards (under the influence of both *Patterns of Culture* and conversations with Fortune and, especially, Bateson).[7] Furthermore, by the time she wrote *Sex and Temperament*, Mead had field notes not only for the Arapesh, Mudugumor, and Tchambuli, but also for Manus and Samoa. Thus, the three cultures used in *Sex and Temperament* were chosen from at least five Mead could have used. However, once selected, they were placed in an order identical to Benedict's: the good, the bad, and the inverted, so to speak. This order certainly was not coincidental, but patterned.

The sequence of cultures in *Sex and Temperament* is much like that in *Patterns of Culture*, thus reflecting a rhetorical strategy common to both Mead and Benedict. Targeting both their colleagues and a wider public, both authors used devices of contrast and inversion to convey concepts of the variability and relativity of cultures. The phenomenal popularity of their books attests to the possibility that this rhetorical strategy was, indeed, successful in its time.

Relativism, but Not as We Know It Today

If, indeed, *Sex and Temperament* and *Patterns of Culture* used this style of contrast as a rhetorical strategy to demonstrate the existence and importance of culture, as well as its wide variability, this does not mean that Mead and Benedict were thoroughgoing cultural relativists in the modern, consistent philosophical sense characteristic of some recent schools of thought in anthropology. Methodologically, Benedict and Mead unashamedly used Western concepts, often very idiosyncratic ones, in their analyses. They did not go out of their way to give sympathetic portrayals of customs, individuals, or cultural patterns they found unsympathetic. In other words, they did not shrink from "value judgments." In a popular teaching text, anthropologist Richard J. Perry (2003:167) has characterized the Boasian approach to cultural rela-

tivism as requiring the separation of value judgments from observation. I would argue, *contra* Perry, that throughout both *Patterns of Culture* and *Sex and Temperament*, observations about specific cultures are not systematically separated from implicit (and sometimes explicit) judgments about cultural practices, and even about the wider cultural patterns in which they are embedded. Both judgment and observation are interwoven into a configurational approach, just as both are interwoven into contemporary ideas of artistic style that served as part of the model for Benedict's version of configuration, if not perhaps as much for Mead's. This is consistent with the prerogative both authors used to place their cultural findings in the service of a critical analysis of their own culture. Such a critical analysis is pursued vigorously by both authors in the last several chapters of their respective books.

Much of Benedict's and Mead's appeal to a wider audience outside of anthropology came from the freedom both authors took to engage in subjective but lively descriptions of societies and the individuals within them. Benedict was given to the generalization and, as it were, the personalization of cultures by means of the purported modal individuals within them (and mitigating this by an analysis of deviance). Mead did this as well. She interwove, into her theoretical and ethnographic descriptions, evocative portraitures of individuals with a few charged brushstrokes. While the goal of both Benedict and Mead may have been to outline something of the observed range of human diversity, to this end they presumed that the insights into human personalities their readers brought with them would be adequate, with guidance, for an understanding of the predicaments of individuals in exotic and contrasting cultures.

The use of concepts familiar to educated readers of the day (e.g., Dionysianism and Aristotelianism, and even paranoia) in *Patterns of Culture* was intended to make the sophisticated audience of that time feel that Kwakiutl, Zuni, and even Dobu were understandable places. Similarly, for the Sepik cultures in *Sex and Temperament*, the range of variability among gender conceptions in those cultures was modeled for American readers in terms of their own. This may seem self-evident as a strategy for readership and wide public acceptance, but I think it has an interesting consequence in terms of Benedict's and Mead's goals for that readership. Their audience was meant to widen the application of their own social knowledge, and not to overturn it at the roots, as would be implied by a thoroughgoing or postmodern version of relativism.

Some of the descriptive techniques used in these books, for instance, some of the psychoanalytically-inflected descriptions of behaviors and cultural patterns, occasionally grate on our sensitivities today, as well as the sensitivities of some of the descendants of those they studied. Yet some of the

discomfort today's readers may have with these books may arise from their comparative lack of a tone of "objective" detachment—a tone that in today's academic culture is often synonymous with the bracketing of value judgment. This was intentional in both books, and should not be considered a flaw in terms of their purposes. Cultural configuration, like artistic style, if it is to be perceived at all must be perceived as a *gestalt*, using all the faculties of the investigator, including "intuitions" which incorporate her own value system, although they are not limited by it.

Mead's and Benedict's books were meant as challenges to American ethnocentrism, and in their time their challenge to ethnocentrism may have been what gave them their enduring reputation as cultural relativists. The prevailing social and anthropological perspective of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries can be considered as both evolutionist and ethnocentric. Educated Euro-Americans considered themselves to stand at the pinnacle of an evolutionary ladder of human achievement, and even of racial fitness.[8] Terms such as "primitive" implied a less developed and worthwhile culture among those to whom it was applied. By contrast, the anthropological endeavor to treat "primitive" cultures as holistically worthy of analysis in their own right implied giving an aesthetic and ethical value to societies that had been largely dismissed as unworthy precursors to our own. Mead's and Benedict's crowning insult to this hierarchical "evolutionary" value system was their explicit use of the behaviors and ideas of "primitives" as critical lessons against the practices of their own more "advanced" culture. This indeed was a relativization of the ethnocentric values of the home culture, one whose impact was made precisely because it challenged and sometimes inverted the common values of the "advanced" society. It was not that Benedict and Mead were trying to get their readers to eschew value judgments in general, or even to eschew all value judgments about so-called "primitives." Their goal was more subversive than the promotion of simple relativism. At the end of the day, or rather, at the end of each of the books, their intention was to use anthropological studies—including their evaluative portraits of other cultures—as leverage to change value judgments within their own culture.[9]

Yet their concern for promoting cultural change at home illustrated precisely their lack of what can be thought of as philosophical or epistemological relativism. Such a view, which is sometimes called historicism when it is applied to the past, claims that the symbols and meanings of other places and other times have to be understood on their own terms. Radical relativism implies that cultures are incommensurable because the very grounds of thought change from culture to culture, or indeed from historical period to historical period. Leaving aside postmodern thinkers, an example of this point of view within anthropology can be found in the works of David Schneider, who,

according to Richard Feinberg (2001:10), was concerned to "put aside one's preconceptions and allow one's ethnographic analysis to proceed exclusively from indigenous cultural categories." This idea that one tries to put aside the ideas of one's own culture and proceed from local or indigenous categories alone is key to a modern relativism that is totally alien to the practice of Benedict and, even more, to Mead.[10] Ethnography of this kind would in principle eschew any application of concepts such as Dionysianism and Apollonialism, and perhaps even (at the extreme) of analytic ideas such as personality or deviance. These are analytic metaconcepts, clearly of Western social scientific origin, which are used to illuminate observed cultural practices in a number of cultures. However, the cultural concepts that indigenously explain these practices remain largely unexplicated in both *Patterns of Culture* and *Sex and Temperament*.[11]

The strong philosophical relativism characteristic of some strains of postwar anthropology, particularly since the 1960s, has in fact been subjected to some powerful criticisms. For example, it can create static idealist systems that do not adequately address variations in practice, and it can neglect the role of individuals in cultural practice and change. It is therefore interesting to see that Benedict and Mead themselves attempt, in the manner of their day, to transcend static views of culture that neglect the individual. By looking at childhood socialization, Mead in particular addressed the dynamics of culture formation and culture change. By examining what might be called (though not by them) the dialectic between cultural norm and deviance, both Benedict and Mead hoped to bring individuals into the social picture.

Not Really a Blank Slate Either

Another issue important in both their day and (resurgently) in our own is that of the role of biology and inheritance in human behavior. For example, evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (2002:25) characterizes Benedict and Mead—citing isolated statements and using little, if any, context—as examples of what he terms a "blank slate" view of human nature, in which inheritance counts for nothing and environmental influences shape the developing organism totally (Pinker 2002:25). However, Benedict and Mead were actually "interactionists" rather than pure environmentalists regarding this issue. This will be clear if we look at how they used the concept of temperament.

A "blank slate" view, to the extent that such a thing exists, entails that human individuals are totally malleable and acted upon by their "environments," which include their cultures. Mead and Benedict did not view individuals in this way at all. Cultural determinism, to the extent that it is present

in their work, is tempered by the existence in each individual, regardless of culture, of a unique "temperament," composed partly from the accidents of early life, and partly, Mead acknowledges as a possibility, from inborn genetic makeup:

> Let us assume that there are definite temperamental differences between human beings which, if not entirely hereditary, at least are established on a hereditary base very soon after birth. Further than this we cannot at present narrow the matter (Mead [1935]1950:208).

This temperament, according to Mead, can be in accord, or conflict, with the dominant themes of the culture in which the person lives. If the individual's temperament is in conflict with the dominant themes of a culture, this poses the problem of "deviance." Deviance of this sort would not arise if culture inscribed the individual's personality on a so-called "blank slate."

Both *Patterns of Culture* and *Sex and Temperament* are substantially organized around this concept of deviance. This concept was not subsequently taken up by mainstream anthropology as the basis upon which an accommodation between nature and nurture, as well as the social and the individual, was to be founded. It can be argued that much anthropology subsequent to Mead's and Benedict's work privileged the social over the individual, so that the latter became nearly effaced in the process. By contrast, both Benedict and Mead spent great portions of their time on the question of temperament and deviance. It strikes me that in today's intellectual environment, their precise delineations of the ways in which temperament and deviance interact with culture present us with a conceptual framework that could be profitably revisited for its theoretical implications, although we may not choose to revive it in the form it took during the 1930s. For like Benedict and Mead, those of us who are interested in cultural difference operate in an intellectual milieu in which genetic explanations have a wide and increasing popularity among the educated public.

The resistance of the Boasian school of American anthropology against genetic explanations current in their day was not primarily a battle against the idea of a universal "human nature." The genetic explanations Boas and his disciples were most concerned to fight were not, as today's purport to be, attempts to explain human universals. Lest we forget, genetic explanations current in both anthropology and the popular mind during the 1930s did not hide their racial implications. Such explanations were frank in their claim to explain differences between human groups, not similarities. It was this climate of explanation that Boas and his students, including Mead and Benedict, challenged.

The concept of temperament in Mead's and Benedict's writing is interesting in this context. It does not deny the possibility of innate and possibly genetic differences among human beings. In fact, such differences are posited to be everywhere and always. However, they are taken out of the racial fray. They are differences only among individuals, never among groups. Such a perspective is consonant with what anthropologists believe today. It is based on the principle, which still stands in human biology, that human genetic variability is greater within groups than between them. Because they addressed wider audiences than their own small academic group of anthropologists, both authors realized, as did Boas, that the general educated public was not about to jettison all genetic explanation. Not in the 1920s and 1930s, as not today. The situation in the post-World War II era was different, and perhaps more amenable to a thoroughgoing relativism, even possibly a "blank slate" kind of relativism. But that era is now over and we have again in some ways returned to theirs.

The difference today is that, while we are experiencing a renewal of genetic explanations of human nature, the most prominent advocates of these, such as Pinker (2002), do not use genetics to explain group differences. Inheritance is used to explain purportedly human universals (of which many are probably real, but others may be artifacts of ethnocentric investigatory techniques), and to explain individual personalities, as in the time of Mead and Benedict. However, today's neo-evolutionists do not, with few exceptions, attribute specific traits or ethoses of human groups to genetic differences. The most public spokespersons of a revived genetic explanation of human nature deny, with conviction, that their main interest is legitimizing a kind of crypto-racism.[12] Of course, a neo-racist movement does exist below the radar of intellectual respectability, and it has indeed singled out Franz Boas and his followers for demonization.[13]

There is no justification for attacking either Mead or Benedict for espousing a "blank slate" view of human psychology or motivation at the individual level.[14] Human beings are malleable in the sense that they will adapt to fit any culture to which they are enculturated as children—and these cultures vary widely. Configurations of particular cultures do not arise out of the genetic characteristics of the individuals who comprise particular societies. In other words, cultural differences are not in any way created by racial genetic differences. According to Mead's and Benedict's analyses, culture exists in a dynamic interaction with individual temperament. In this "culture and temperament" perspective, culture may, in some sense, standardize personalities in accord with particular cultural values. However, human personalities are not culture's sole creation or manufacture. Indeed, different and even so-called "deviant" temperaments exist in all cultures. Acting as a selecting agent, albeit

for Mead and Benedict a strong one, culture selects and then exaggerates certain human potentials, reinforcing some and suppressing others, or at times channeling the expression of these potentials in different ways.

Gregory Bateson's *Naven* as a Configurationist Work

It remained to Gregory Bateson's ([1936] 1958) *Naven* to add the dimension of interactive social process to this view. Indeed, Bateson himself claimed that his book had been profoundly influenced by *Patterns of Culture*. As he remarked during a 1976 symposium:

> Into this puzzlement came the manuscript of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, and the first suggestion of a field of theory where I might contribute. It took some years to develop the linkage between character of persons and configuration of cultures. Margaret's first big contribution in that area was *Sex and Temperament*; mine was *Naven* (G. Bateson 1991:89).

Bateson's debt to Benedict might have been more visible had he followed up on his resolve, stated in his 1936 Epilogue to *Naven*, to use the term "configuration" for some of the meanings he had incorporated into the term "ethos." As I mentioned above, Mead uses the term "ethos" almost exclusively in *Sex and Temperament*, probably following Bateson's use of the term as he was developing it in his studies of the Iatmul of New Guinea, while Benedict does not use "ethos" but instead uses the concepts of configuration and pattern. Bateson's statement in his 1936 Epilogue to *Naven* can be helpful in sorting out the relationships among these concepts as he saw them at that time. Bateson wrote that he would thenceforth use "configuration" to refer to the "pervasive characteristics of a culture which can be ascribed to the standardization of the individuals" (G. Bateson [1936] 1958:265). He further noted that "Dr. Benedict has agreed with me in conversation that, in her original use of this term, she intended it to include the standardization of many different aspects of personality" (G. Bateson [1936] 1958: 265). Bateson retained the term "ethos" for the affective dimension of this standardization, which he distinguished from another component of configuration, one he had termed "*eidos*," defined in the original text of *Naven* as "a standardization of the cognitive aspects of personality" (G. Bateson [1936] 1958:220), related to "the general patterning of the cultural structure" (G. Bateson [1936] 1958:30). I interpret Bateson's discussion of these concepts in his 1936 Epilogue to *Naven* as marking a moment of insight on his part regarding the differences between his (and Mead's) use of a concept of ethos,

privileging the affective dimension of culture, and Benedict's wider concept of configuration which incorporated both affective and cognitive aspects.

Bateson's discussion here can help us understand how Benedict's concepts of configuration and pattern actually transcended, for him, any so-called view of culture as personality writ large.[15] Bateson's interest in theoretical precision provides us with an illuminating contrast between Benedict's use of a wider concept of configuration, bridging both the general pattern of the culture and its ethos, and Mead's almost exclusive use of the concept of ethos, which emphasized the affective dimension. Accordingly, Mead's ethnographic choices in *Sex and Temperament* need to be understood in the light of her choice to describe primarily ethos rather than cultural pattern or configuration in Benedict's wider sense.

In *Naven* Bateson ([1936] 1958) transformed these ideas into an incipient systems theory that aimed to examine the question of how ethos can be a significant perspective by which to view the dynamics of cultural process. Like Mead, Bateson saw men and women as being influenced by their culture into adopting standardized contrasts in what might be called gender ethos. But unlike Mead, he was not content merely to compare ethoses among different cultures; instead he created a dynamic model of the Iatmul that focused on how the various ethoses interacted in what later would be called feedback relationships. Comparisons of these "schismogenic," or feedback, relationships with processes in the Western world can be found throughout *Naven* (G. Bateson [1936] 1958: 171–197). However, Bateson seems to have been less interested than either Mead or Benedict in large-scale or systematic cultural comparisons such as those set forth in *Patterns of Culture* or *Sex and Temperament*. Instead, he took from the former a concept of ethos he used toward very different ends. From the latter text he took the idea of sex (gender) contrasts in ethos (G. Bateson [1936] 1958: 172), but he was interested in how these contrasts played out in cultural dynamics of the type he would later characterize as cybernetic (G. Bateson 1972), rather than in cultural comparison.

The Danger of Premature Configuration?

In spite of its conceptual and theoretical development in the works of Benedict, Mead, and the early Bateson, the configurationist school was not fated to find followers in the practice of postwar anthropology, for reasons beyond the scope of this article. Today most anthropologists would not define their discipline as being in the business of contrasting ethoses, which are notoriously elusive and hard to substantiate. In a recent article criticizing Mead's denial of significant warfare among the Mountain Arapesh, Paul Roscoe (2003) blames

Benedict's pattern theory for Mead's inability to take account of the evidence for warfare, which should have been evident even from her own (and Reo Fortune's) notes and published work. Roscoe (2003:589) claims that "Benedict's supposition that cultures organize themselves according to particular gestalts had a powerful capacity for self-validation." He continues:

> Whatever evidence seemed to contradict the gestalt discerned by the anthropological analyst could automatically be invalidated by the further propositions that culture worked to (1) refashion inharmonious cultural traits to forge a new, harmonious whole and (2) transform individualists who broke from the pattern into deviants. Perhaps, then [in the Samoan case, but by extension for the Arapesh as well]...Benedict had furnished her [Mead] with a methodological deutero-gestalt that worked insidiously to confirm those interpretations (Roscoe 2003:589).

Paradoxically, Benedict herself may have worried about this possible consequence of her theory of cultural configuration. In an underappreciated comment in *Patterns of Culture*, Benedict warned that:

> Facile generalizations about the integration of culture are most dangerous in field-work. When one is mastering the language and all the idiosyncrasies of behaviour of an esoteric culture, preoccupation with its configuration may well be an obstacle to a genuine understanding. . . . [G]eneralizations about the integration of culture will be empty in proportion as they are dogmatic and universalized ([1934] 1959:229).

In spite of such Zen warnings, it is probably the rare fieldworker who does not at some point examine whether the cultural data generated in the process of research "fits" some emerging *gestalt* that makes sense of the data's seeming chaos and contradictions. There are many "closet Benedicts" in anthropology, but probably few of them would today use a concept of cultural pattern, as Benedict and Mead both did, to demonstrate to a wider public the variability of cultures.

Conclusion: Benedict's and Mead's Works Need a Second Look

The demonstration of cultural variability through rhetorics of contrast and comparison was a task for which Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead felt the time was ripe in the 1930s. But what of today? Culture is an idea that has

taken hold in the popular mind, but not in a way that would have been understood by the anthropological profession in much of the 20th-century. Segments of the public now seem to believe either that culture is something that is being totally effaced by globalization, or else something easily imposed by a corporate CEO's fiat.

Whatever the faults of their approaches may have been, *Patterns of Culture* and *Sex and Temperament* address subtle points. Cultures do vary, and it is important to set forth the range of their variation, which is surprisingly wide when looked at from the point of view of a naïve ethnocentrism. Yet individual temperament, which may result from an interaction between biology and personal experience, is not effaced by culture. Cultures do not inscribe modal personalities on a "blank slate," but select for valued dispositions and behaviors via the upbringing of children, the rewards and discouragements of everyday life, and the common ideas that are used to discuss social life and to think about it. (Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead also recognized that this selection is not infallible and deviance exists in every society.) It is important to see cultures, and individuals within those cultures, relativistically in context. But this does not mean that all judgment is suspended indefinitely; in fact, moral and aesthetic perception is part of the fieldworker's toolkit. Possibly many cultures exhibit a kind of aesthetic and conceptual unity in the different aspects of their lives; indeed, it may be dangerous for ethnographic fieldworkers to think that they have perceived a configurational pattern too early in fieldwork, but an important dimension of culture may be lost if anthropologists neglect this aspect.

Whatever the accuracies and inaccuracies of Benedict's and Mead's cultural portraits, which were painted with the intention of illuminating the existence of the cultural realm by well-placed contrasts, their concept of temperament and its relationship to culture is one that addresses many of the concerns about nature and nurture which still bedevil us. The approach they outlined may usefully be revisited by those anthropologists who still believe that "culture" delimits something more than an epiphenomenon of the agency of self-seeking monads, or, for that matter, of disembodied power structures. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead presented a richer perspective than we sometimes think, one that provocatively addressed issues of its own time, and is worth considering once again in our own.

NOTES

I would like to thank Mary Catherine Bateson for her comments on this article.

1. Mead does not directly define "ethos" in *Sex and Temperament*. The reference is to

an index entry which demonstrates the range of topics to which she explicitly or implicitly used the term.

2. The popular success of Steven Pinker's (2002) book, *The Blank Slate*, has encouraged a belief that Boasian anthropologists (including Benedict and Mead) did not accept any genetic constraints on human nature, and further, that they believed human nature and personality to be malleable by culture because they are formed by culture as if in a "factory." Pinker feels it unnecessary to substantiate this view except by providing his readers with a few "damning" quotes by Benedict and by Mead (Pinker 2002:25). Pinker gives an identical out-of-context "sound-bite" treatment to a whole series of significant theorists in anthropological history from Franz Boas to George Murdock to Clifford Geertz. In any case, Benedict's and Mead's position was not of this "blank slate" variety, as both of them discussed in detail the interaction of biological and cultural factors in producing the modal personalities of various cultures.

3. Reo Fortune was the ethnographer of Dobu, and he also studied the Sepik societies described in *Sex and Temperament* along with Margaret Mead. When I read Benedict's and Mead's books as a student, it was hard to avoid feeling that their emphasis on the competitive and hostile aspects of Dobu and Mundugumor must have had something to do with Fortune's own preoccupations in the study of culture. I shall not, however, attempt to pursue that intriguing question further here.

4. Mead is quite clear that what is at stake in *Sex and Temperament* are not sex roles in a sociological sense, but rather the temperaments and personalities which are stereotypically assigned to the genders who fill these roles. According to Mead's ([1935] 1950: xiii–xvi) "Introduction," these temperaments may vary more than the sex roles themselves.

5. *Erewhon* was mentioned on "Reading Suggested by Gregory Bateson," a one-page list posted on Bateson's office door at the University of California at Santa Cruz. This list was published in *The Co-Evolution Quarterly* (G. Bateson 1974).

6. Caffrey (1989:215–237) has discussed at length the place of Benedict's configurationism in contemporary and subsequent debates about how anthropology was or could be a "science."

7. The genesis of the specific thesis of *Sex and Temperament* in fact relates to a complex set of ideations (sometimes known as "the squares") discussed in Mead's autobiographical *Blackberry Winter* (Mead ([1972] 1995:217–221; see also Banner 2003:326–336), M. C. Bateson (1984:132–142), and Sullivan (2004). These pose intriguing and seductive problems of both theory and biography, which I avoid in the present context of this article, since they detract from a consideration of the ideas in *Sex and Temperament* in their own terms. Skepticism of "the squares" should not lessen appreciation for Mead's published arguments any more than a consideration of Isaac Newton's arcane theological and mystical writings should make one skeptical of his physics.

8. The term "evolutionism" in this sense has a historical meaning, not to be confused with current applications of evolutionary theory to human universals. Nineteenth-century social evolutionism implied the existence of different stages of society and culture ranked from inferior to superior. Each human society was supposed to progress from primitive

stages to civilized ones according to a specific sequence. Teleological social or cultural evolutionism of this kind is *not* characteristic of most late 20th and early 21st century applications of Darwinist evolutionary theory to human beings (e.g. Pinker 2002).

9. This aspect of their work, particularly Mead's, has been noted by feminist scholars. Newman's (1996) provocative article anticipates several of the lines of argument made here. (I was not made aware of this article until after I had formulated the arguments in this essay.) Newman's position as a feminist historian gives her a certain distance from the ethnography wars that enables her to see certain historical truths regarding Mead (and, implicitly, Benedict as well):

> Mead was not a moral relativist, nor was she attempting to write value-free ethnographies. Her understanding of cultural relativism did not prevent her from making moral distinctions among various cultural practices. Thus, I prefer the term cultural comparativism, for it enables us to retain the idea that for Mead the point of studying other cultures was not to accept all social arrangements as equally valid, but to determine which arrangements represented better ways of living. Such a perspective meant that Mead and others who worked within this paradigm resisted normative judgments of the sort that automatically called for primitives to adopt civilized gender roles, but they did not suspend all judgments. Mead wanted to expand Americans' repertoire of conceivable alternatives so that they might envision new ways of reforming their social institutions (Newman 1996:236–237).

Newman's (1996:234–239) work is also strong on the place of gender within 19th-century "evolutionist" anthropology, and on how Mead's work both overturned the assumptions of that so-called "evolutionism," and yet in some ways also reproduced some of its ideas. Banner (2003b), however, argues that it is not fair to count Mead as believing in the superiority of the West. My own reading of Mead's core beliefs makes me closer to Banner's position on this particular point than I am to Newman's.

10. I am indebted here to a discussion on the ASAONET Internet "Listserv" discussion group on the topic of relativism in contemporary anthropology, and in particular to Richard Feinberg's (9 March 2004) posting on that list. The discussion did not particularly focus on Mead or Benedict, but rather on how to discuss relativism with today's anthropology students.

11. For Mead's grounding in what she thought would become a universalistic, not relativistic, science of psychology, see Patricia Francis (this volume, 74–90).

12. For the social determinists among us, I note here that today's alleged meritocracy justifies itself by the presence of diversity in its elites, or almost-elites. Thus racism, as a doctrine, is not "necessary" today for the justification of hierarchy or inequality. Individual difference, the "merit" in the ideology of meritocracy, suffices for this—albeit sometimes culture, in the form of pathological subculture, is blamed for the failure of individuals or groups.

13. Examples of this movement are not difficult to find on the Internet. Current denunciations of the Boasians in the interest of views far from the mainstream can be noted in publications sponsored by the Institute for Historical Review (Whitney 2002:20), a Holo-

caust revisionist group, and the Virginia Dare Society (Francis 2002), which advocates a racially tinged American nativist ethnonationalism.

14. Mead 's refutation of the blank slate follows:

> If human nature were completely homogeneous raw material, lacking specific drives and characterized by no important constitutional differences between individuals, then individuals who display personality traits so antithetical to the social pressure should not reappear in societies of such differing emphases (Mead [1935] 1950:208).

Mary Catherine Bateson's (1984:128–140) memoir of her parents contains a lengthy discussion of Mead's intellectual concerns and development at the time of writing *Sex and Temperament*, and thereafter. This account describes a Mead who was willing to entertain some role for the biologically given in human personality—even a role which involves gender (M. C. Bateson [1984:131])—but only insofar as this could be expressed so as not to give aid and comfort to, in Mary Catherine Bateson's (1984:139) evocative words, "those who evoke the old, cruel dichotomy of nature versus nurture and misuse biological explanations to justify social facts."

15. See Sullivan (this volume, 91–105) for a refutation of the prevalent misunderstanding that Benedict's or Mead's vision of culture was limited to such a conception.

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