

A Praxeological Approach to Cultural Relativism

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western understanding of personhood, defined by features like individualism, personal autonomy, and inwardness is the pillar of allegedly universal concepts like democracy, human rights and liberal capitalism and the policies following from these concepts. Exploring culturally specific notions of personhood is a central part of discussing on whose terms Africa related research is carried out. Therefore, it leads inevitably to the ongoing debate about cultural relativism.

Where culturally specific concepts of the person originate from is their very place in the symbolic order and in the system of social relations. The culturally specific content of what it means to be a person (that is the rights and duties and the values attached to them in a certain setting) derives from that place (which is of course at the same time a power-suffused placing) in the collective sphere.

However, this general observation tends to conceal the fact that personhood is only in certain situations an intellectual operation but foremost a lived practice: personhood is everyday social action.

Consequently, a shift of analytical perspective toward praxeological approaches as they were developed by Bourdieu who discussed a "practical sense" and the "habitus", by Giddens who formulated a theory of "structuration" and by Reckwitz who understands practices as complex and inseparable units of knowledge, of emotional states, of artefacts and of bodily activities might possibly avoid some pitfalls of the debate about cultural relativism.

By focusing on practices in this debate three things are to be gained.

Firstly, the analysis of the ever shifting practices of every day social action calls for a thorough historicizing. Secondly and following from that, essentializing discourses about the cultural provenance of notions like personhood would be pushed to the analytical background. Thirdly, practices as complex wholes that are deeply grounded in local symbolic, social, emotional and material setups might help to dissipate ethical universal claims that abstract much too easily from cultural particularities.