

## Cultural Construction of Human Nature

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### Abstract

This paper argues that human nature is not universal but shaped by culture and history. Drawing on scholars like Mintz, Asad, and Sahlins, it shows how human values and behaviour change across time and societies. It also discusses challenges from science, especially views that support innate human traits. By using historical examples, the paper highlights that ideas of morality, religion, and behaviour are not fixed but culturally constructed. It concludes that human nature is better understood through history and social sciences rather than a single scientific explanation.

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### Introduction

**“Man has no Nature, What He has is History”-Jose Ortega Y Gasset <sup>[1]</sup>**

The issue of human nature which is something that exists objectively and is transhistorical as well as transcultural has emerged as important idea which is accepted, rejected or reinvented by modern academics. This issue is not only problem in social sciences but even disciplines like psychology and biology have high stakes in it. The ignorance of this issue in any anthropological or historical research can be very problematic as Sindy Mintz has pointed out that how initially he ignored the important question of demand, taste and saw them natural, but when he reflected back and asked the important question like to what extent demand was natural and the search of meaning of words like taste. Was taste naturally built in humans? These sets of question lead him to a history of changing relationships among peoples, societies and substances <sup>[2]</sup> Talal Asad also in his work argued about the notion of a universal human nature propagated by western intellectuals and anthropologists and how this is one of the important idea contributing in making modern western civilization universal by establishing a hierarchy in which the west is more civilized and to become westernize or to

modernize is a progressive idea <sup>[3]</sup>. Tzevetan Todorov in his work show how the early European encounter with the new world led to very subjective and situational understanding of Humans of new world <sup>[4]</sup>. Phillippe Buc in his work tries to go away from the generalized concepts of violence in religion and engage in a historic narrative of idiosyncratic forms of violence peculiar to west <sup>[5]</sup>. In Bynum work also one can find her concern with anachronism which the disciplines of psychology and bio-medical science want to impose on women in Middle Ages. The problem of stereotyped notion about women behavior in our present society seems to be very implicit in her arguments. She very well argues for the culture centric development of notions. Her work also inspires us to look for gendered notion of human nature <sup>[6]</sup>. The arguments of these scholars lead us on important observation made by Marshall. D. Sahlins “Culture is the Human nature” <sup>[7]</sup>. Most of the social scientist now subscribe to the views about cultural construction of human nature but this view should not be seen as uncontested rather it faces many practical as well as theoretical oppositions from society and academicians outside social sciences and even there are contradictions as well as differences within the adherents of this theory. In this paper I just want to highlight some of these debates and lastly

focus on how history has and can contribute in Understanding the problem with human nature.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Steven Pinker, p.22.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* Ch.1.

<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* pp. 18-21.

<sup>4</sup> Todorov discuss about how writings of early encounter with the natives of new world influenced the European intellectuals like Rousseau in framing the concept of human nature. But these writings did not considered a single view about natives. They were classified as noble savage at one point and Barbaric primitive humans at other.

<sup>5</sup> Phillippe Buc, *Holy war, Martyrdom and Terror*.

<sup>6</sup> The issue of human nature seems to be very gendered historically because most of the western intellectuals from 17<sup>th</sup> century were looking at man's nature. How men behaved in all the society. Women were pout of discussion to derive a theory of human nature till recent times.

caroline Walker Bymen, *holy feast and holy fast*.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall. D. Sahlins. "*The western illusion of human nature*".

### The challenge from society

#### "Man is an Animal that Requires a Master"-Immanuel Kant<sup>[8]</sup>

Admitting however that the case was hopeless in as much as "the master is himself an animal, and needs a master".

The utilization of any concept is measured by its effect on the society. The denial or acceptance of human nature has always a profound effect in the society. But the issue is more complex than it looks because even if there is a social acceptance for a universal human nature than there is bigger challenge waiting i.e. whether humans are "noble savage" or are they "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish<sup>[9]</sup>". So, there is an optimistic as well as pessimistic viewpoint of human nature. The modern state in many ways is very opportunistic in using these options depending on situation but the state has one more option at its disposal. The option of denial of human nature and can take refuge of a cultural relativist point of view. The notions of mortality and ethics are very intact with the issue of human nature. The problem historically many societies has dealt that should certain moral and ethical codes be imposed on humans to make them civilized or has culture corrupted the noble savage. One can hear these kinds of debates in societies influenced by western thoughts because these debates have their roots in western intellectual tradition. The cultural relativism model in which there is a complete denial of universal human nature has affected the modern social life in many ways the best example is of the behaviorist who believed that behavior could be understood independently from rest of biology. So it seems that the notion of human nature adhered by modern states or powerful elites in the society is very ambiguous but this ambiguity is working in favor of their interests as it gives them more option at their disposal to control people in different ways depending on situation.

<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> The first idea was propagated by jean-jacques rousseau and second by Thomas hobbes.

### The Challenge from Science

While in our society their exists an ambiguity about human nature. The lines drawn in the field of academics is very clear. Some issues like consciousness and human nature have gained inter-disciplinary attention. Like consciousness studies has become an important sub-field in subjects of natural science and also drawn much attention of psychologists and biologists. The issue of human nature has also drawn

considerable amount of attention from these same disciplines. This topic has gained special focus from those psychologists who are moving away from behaviorism as well as biologists who now adhere to the theory of selfish gene. Some important modern linguist also today adheres to the idea of innate human structure in the way they generate patterns in grammar across language. Here I can discuss the views of Steven pinker whose work „The blank slate: the modern denial of human nature” takes upon consideration all the issues mentioned above. Pinker tries to retrace the history that led people to see the concept of human nature as dangerous. He argues that innate theory has generated a fear among scholars that it has dangers to open the doors of inborn differences, which could support racism, or that it implies that natural traits are unchangeable, which could weaken state support programs. He challenges the conviction that humanity can be reshaped by massive social engineering programs. His main focus to prove his argument is on a list of human universals drawn by Downald e brown like sexuality, human emotions etc. one of the most important claim that pinker makes is when he define culture based on psychological and biological imperatives. According to him

“Culture is a pool of technological and social innovations that people accumulate to help them in their lives not a collection of arbitrary roles and symbols that happen to befall them<sup>[10]</sup>”

This is a very limited approach to see relation between individuals and the culture they live in. his definition gives us impression that out of many alternatives individuals consciously choose what is best for them.in order to prove his point that culture doesn't shape human life he is generating a very false interpretation between culture and an individual. Emile Durkheim once argued:

“Every time that a social phenomenon id directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure the explanation is false. The group thinks, feels and acts quite differently from the way in which member were they isolated would think. If we begin with the individual in seeking to explain phenomena we shall able to understand nothing or what takes place in the group. Individual nature is nearly the indeterminate material that the social factors molds and transfers. There contribution consists exclusively in very general attitudes in vague and consequently plastic predisposition”.

So it is very difficult to say that individuals have much control over their culture or society they are born.

Secondly, the main problem when any scientific idea used in social sciences there is always a fear of gross generalization. This is true for psychology also it is based on very individualistic type of research and its mass application across different culture is questionable. Thirdly, his focus on human universals like sexuality can be rejected by argument of anthropologist Marshall. D. Shalins who argues that the relation between biology and culture is not that all culture has sex rather all sex has culture. Shalins and other anthropologists like Clifford Geertz argue that humans organize their biological functions in various cultural forms in this way humans are not blank slate but they do have biological imperatives. Geertz brilliantly argued that culture is older than “Homo sapiens”, many times older, and culture was a fundamental condition of species biological development<sup>[11]</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Pinker: *the blank slate*.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall. D. Shalins; "*the western illusion of human nature*"

### The Problem with Adherents

It is not that there is a uniformity of viewpoint within the scholars who support the cultural construction of human nature. The graver problem is the cultural relativist sometimes contradicts themselves. One such contradiction about Marxism has been pointed out by Peter Singer. He argues that Marxists adopted relativism in their own theories. According to the Marxists the ruling ideas of each period are the ideas of its ruling class and so things like morality and ethics of a society is relative to its dominant economic basis. So they rejected feudal or bourgeoisie morality to objective, universal validity. At this point Singer raise the question if all morality is relative, what is special about communism? Why side with the Proletariat than the bourgeoisie? So Engles dealt with the problem but only by abandoning relativism in favor of the more limited claim that morality of a society divided into classes will always be relative to the ruling classes, although the morality of the society without class antagonism could be a "really human morality" but relativity is gone when Engles talk about really human Morality <sup>[12]</sup>.

It is only with Marxist but many historians and anthropologist do face the some contradiction which is also pointed out in Talal Asad work there he criticizes one of the champions of cultural construction model. Clifford Geertz who itself subscribe to a trans-historical and trans-cultural definition of religion. In most of the twentieth century majority of the anthropologist believed in universal human nature with cultural plurality. There object of study i.e. non-European cultures were seen as primitive, local, incomplete extension of Europe itself. So the problem described by Sidney Mintz about taking many things as natural granted also works for many scholars who are adherents of cultural construction of human nature. This remind us about many of the concepts, definitions and habits which are taken for granted to re-examine them.

<sup>12</sup> Peter singer; *about ethics*, pp.140-141.

### The Contribution of History

Historical understanding about different cultures has contributed a lot in rejection of the idea of „universal human nature“. Temporality and spatiality are two main components of history. Applying these to different cultures as a result gives different human values embedded in those cultures. Our historical understanding has proved that there is nothing such that human nature independent of human culture. History has shown how in different time periods with change in culture the meaning of human values change.it shows us the construction of similarities and differences among different culture due to influences, surroundings or interactions. Sidney Mintz work shows us how historical process shape our present. He shows us how sugar and sweetness is adapted in different culture in different ways Buc work signifies similar implication that how culture shape an event. History shows that even every religion of the world has a different concept of human nature. Some are more local others universal some cults or religion change from local to universal with time all these dynamism in the concept of human nature shows that there is no such human nature which is objective, transcultural and trans historical.

### Conclusion

Ludwig Wittgenstein argument stands true here that all questions about love, art, history, culture, music that relate to the attempt to understand ourselves better does not need to have a scientific answer. For example the researches in

consciences or human nature happening in disciplines of sciences how can it help us understand ourselves any better <sup>[13]</sup>. So it is better that these topics should be dealt in a social science realm.

<sup>13</sup> Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein and the two cultures*. Pg. 383.

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