


## CULTURAL RELATIVISM THEORY AND AZERBAIJAN DEMOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

The article aims to analyze the situation of democracy in Azerbaijan through the lens of cultural relativism theory. The study begins by providing a brief overview of cultural relativism, which posits that cultural practices and values should be understood within their own context rather than being judged based on external standards. The article then discusses the influence of Soviet democracy on the current system in Azerbaijan, highlighting the differences between Soviet democracy and the democratic system in the United States. The main focus of the study is on contemporary Azerbaijan democracy, which is examined through the perspective of cultural relativism. The article concludes by summarizing the findings and offering some insights into the future direction of democracy in Azerbaijan. The analysis begins by providing an overview of cultural relativism theory and its relevance to the study of democracy. It then traces the historical development of democracy in Azerbaijan, beginning with the influence of Soviet democracy and highlighting the differences between this system and the democratic system in the United States. The focus then shifts to a more detailed examination of contemporary Azerbaijan democracy, highlighting the ways in which cultural relativism theory can help to explain its unique characteristics and challenges. Finally, the study concludes with a discussion of the future prospects for democracy in Azerbaijan in light of the insights gained through the application of cultural relativism theory. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and diversity of democracy across different cultural contexts.

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## Introduction

Democracy is a system of governance characterized by the vesting of decision-making authority in the people, either directly or through their elected representatives. Its essence lies in the promotion of principles such as equality, participation, and accountability. The importance of democracy stems from several factors (Eley, 2002, p. 8).

Firstly, it allows for the expression of diverse perspectives, thereby ensuring that the interests of all members of society are taken into consideration. Secondly, it provides a means of holding those in positions of authority accountable to the people, which helps to prevent abuses of power and corruption. Additionally, democracy facilitates peaceful transitions of power, which helps to maintain stability and prevent conflicts. Finally, it fosters active citizenship and engagement in the political process, fostering a sense of community and belonging among the populace (Roper, 2012, p. 29).

Democracy is not unique to any particular country or culture. It is a system of government that has been adopted by many different societies around the world, and it has taken a variety of forms in different contexts. While the core principles of democracy – such as equality, participation, and accountability – are universal, the specific practices and institutions associated with democracy can vary significantly from one country to another. Some countries may have more liberal democratic systems, with strong checks and balances and a high degree of individual freedom, while others may have more authoritarian or illiberal democratic systems, with less emphasis on individual rights and more emphasis on the collective interests of the community or the state. Ultimately, the form and functioning of democracy in a particular country will depend on a range of factors, including its history, culture, economic development, and political context.

## Research Methods

In the article, Azerbaijan democracy is explained through the theory of cultural relativism via case study. A case study is a research method that involves in-depth, detailed analysis of a specific case or situation. Case studies are often used in social science research to explore a particular phenomenon or issue in depth. Case studies are particularly useful for examining complex situations that involve multiple

variables or stakeholders, as they allow researchers to explore the context and nuances of the case in question. Case studies can be qualitative or quantitative, and they may involve the use of various data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, or surveys. Case studies are often used to generate new theories or to test existing theories, and they can provide valuable insights into real-world situations.

### **Cultural relativism theory**

Cultural relativism is the idea that a person's beliefs and practices should be understood within the context of their own culture, and that the norms and values of one culture should not be evaluated using those of another. This concept was first proposed by Franz Boas in the late 19th century and later popularized by his students (Billet, 2007, p. 11). It became widely accepted in the field of anthropology in the early 20th century, and is often seen as a response to events such as colonialism, racism, and ethnocentrism. The idea of cultural relativism holds that the vast and pervasive nature of culture means that it cannot be linked to a specific race. This theory includes specific epistemological and methodological claims, although there is debate about whether these claims necessitate a specific ethical stance (Brenner-Golomb, 2010, p. 20).

During the period between World War I and II, cultural relativism was widely adopted by American anthropologists as a means of rejecting the universality of Western culture and preserving the distinctness of non-Western cultures. This approach, which originated with Franz Boas, emphasizes the role of language in categorizing and interpreting experiences, and suggests that the existence of different languages indicates that people categorize and experience language differently (Sikka, 2011, p. 20). Cultural relativism also highlights the fact that scientists, like all individuals, are necessarily ethnocentric and that it is important to employ methods such as ethnography, in which researchers live with and become immersed in the culture they are studying, in order to better understand and avoid the limitations of one's own cultural perspective. The adoption of cultural relativism in anthropology was influenced by a range of philosophers and scientists, including Karl Pearson, Ernst Mach, Henri Poincaré, William James, and John Dewey, and was intended to move the discipline from a "naively metaphysical" to an "epistemological stage (Tilley, 2000, pp. 509-510)."

Franz Boas argued that the traditional method of studying cultures, which involved grouping similar artifacts together and classifying them based on shared characteristics, ignored the individual context and history of each artifact. He proposed an inductive approach that focused on studying each cultural element

individually in its specific context and history. Boas also emphasized the importance of considering the diverse range of cultural variations and the need to adopt cultural relativism as a method in order to avoid ethnocentrism (Zumwalt, 2002). His student, Alfred Kroeber, described the development of cultural relativism as a shift from a self-centered perspective to a broader, more objective one, similar to the shift from a geocentric to a Copernican view of the universe. Ruth Benedict also emphasized the need for cultural relativism in scientific research in order to avoid preferential weighting and to better understand the significance of cultural customs (Brown, 2008, pp. 364-365).

In the early 20th century, cultural relativism was the central approach used by American anthropologists to reject the idea of Western universality and to preserve non-Western cultures. It was applied as a methodological tool to transform Boas' epistemology into practical principles, particularly in the study of language. According to Boas, language is not only a means of communication, but also a way of categorizing experiences, and the existence of different languages suggests that people categorize and therefore experience language differently. This view was further developed in the hypothesis of linguistic relativity (Boas, 1966).

Boas and his students recognized that, in order to conduct scientific research in other cultures, they needed to employ methods that would allow them to overcome the limitations of their own ethnocentrism. One such method is ethnography, which involves living with people of another culture for an extended period of time in order to learn the local language and become at least partially enculturated in that culture. Ethnology is another method, which involves comparing and contrasting as many cultures as possible in a systematic and unbiased manner. In the late 19th century, this was primarily done through the display of material artifacts in museums (Rachels, 1986, pp. 48-50).

Boas argued that the museum approach to cultural evolution, which assumed that similar causes produce similar effects, ignored the importance of the individual and the local context in understanding human beliefs and practices. He argued in favor of an inductive method and the importance of studying each individual specimen in its historical and cultural context (Boas, 2022). His student, Alfred Kroeber, described the rise of the relativist perspective as a shift from a narrow, self-centered view to a broader, objective perspective based on comparative analysis (Billet, 2007, p. 35).

Cultural relativism has a critical function in anthropology, as it allows for self-reflection and the disruption of taken-for-granted assumptions within a given culture. This approach can be used to challenge the universal validity of certain cultural

practices or beliefs. An example of this is Margaret Mead's research on adolescent female sexuality in Samoa, which called into question the perceived naturalness and inevitability of stress and rebellion during adolescence in the United States (Mead, 2001). However, for cultural relativism to be used effectively as a means of cultural critique, it is necessary for there to be comparable ethnographic research conducted within one's own culture. While some anthropologists have conducted research in the United States, the principles of relativism often lead researchers to study foreign cultures (Brenner-Golomb, 2010).

Wray Miller proposed that cultural relativism can be understood through two analytical continuums: vertical and horizontal. Vertical relativism posits that the morals and ethics of cultures are shaped by the societal norms and conditions of their respective time periods. Thus, any moral evaluations of past cultures must be contextualized by these norms and conditions. This approach also acknowledges that cultural values and norms may evolve in response to changing norms and conditions in the future. Horizontal relativism suggests that the values and norms of present-day cultures are influenced by their unique histories, geographies, and environmental factors. Therefore, any moral assessments of current cultures should take into account these unique differences (Miller, 2001).

Anthropologists who followed the tradition established by Boas believed that cultural relativism was a fundamental aspect of the discipline, as it allowed for the study of human cultures without imposing the values of the researcher's own culture. However, some anthropologists have criticized the way in which cultural relativism has been used to obscure the impact of Western colonialism and imperialism (Brenner-Golomb, 2010).

Stanley Diamond argued that the concept of cultural relativism has been co-opted and has lost its critical function, becoming instead a way for anthropologists to appeal to a popular audience and to justify their own cultural milieu. George Stocking similarly pointed out that cultural relativism has been perceived as a form of neo-racism, which serves to justify the underdeveloped technological and economic status of formerly colonized peoples (Diamond, 1980).

Geertz argued that the conflict between proponents and critics of cultural relativism was not a genuine contradiction, but rather the result of misunderstandings about the concept. He argued that both sides were responding to the same thing: knowledge about other cultures. He defended cultural relativism as a concern that should motivate various inquiries rather than as a solution or explanation, and argued that it is only through starting from cultural relativism and its tolerances that we may hope to develop a new set of absolute values and standards, if such are achievable or

desirable (Geertz, 2017). Geertz's defense of cultural relativism echoed Kroeber's earlier statement that most people's belief in relativism is somewhat strengthened by their hatred of the intolerant and their recognition that it is only through starting from relativism that we may hope to develop new absolute values and standards (Geertz, 2017).

### **Soviet democracy as the predecessor of Azerbaijan democracy**

Soviet democracy, also known as council democracy, is a political system in which the population exercises its rule through the direct election of councils. These councils, referred to as soviets in Russian, are responsible to the electors who have chosen them and are required to follow their instructions. This model of representation, known as an imperative mandate, differs from a free mandate, in which elected delegates are only accountable to their own conscience. Delegates may be removed from their positions at any time or recalled through a vote.

In a Soviet democracy, voters are organized into basic units such as a company's workers, a district's residents, or a barracks' soldiers (Childs, 2000, p. 22). These units directly elect delegates to serve as public officials who act as legislators, government officials, and judges all in one. This system is distinct from earlier democracy models proposed by John Locke and Montesquieu, as it lacks a separation of powers. The councils are elected at various levels, starting at the local level where delegates are elected in plenary assemblies and may then delegate members to higher levels. This process of delegation continues up to the state level Congress of Soviets. The electoral process thus proceeds from the bottom up, with each level typically corresponding to an administrative level (Childs, 2000).

The concept of Soviet democracy, or council democracy, whereby rule is exercised by directly elected councils that are responsible to their electors and bound by their instructions, has been a subject of debate and criticism. While some have viewed it as a farce and a facade for oppressive and totalitarian rule, others have argued that it represented a unique form of democracy that was hindered by its own democratic principles (Bullock, 2011, pp. 32-33). Historical analyses of the Soviet regime have generally fallen into two camps: the "totalitarian model," which portrays the Soviet government as oppressive and totalitarian, and the "revisionist school," which focuses on the relatively autonomous institutions that may have influenced policy at higher levels and suggests that the Communist Party leadership was compelled to adjust to social forces (Furman, 2022). Some studies have indicated that Soviet citizens actively engaged with the authorities through letters and visits, and

that the authorities responded, however insufficiently, due to the ideals of democracy. The lengthy process leading to the Soviet Constitution of 1936 has been attributed to the regime's democratic character, which was perceived as impeding its functioning (Sirianni, 1982, p. 20).

The creation of soviets, or workers' councils, in the aftermath of the 1905 Russian Revolution was a significant development in the evolution of Soviet democracy. Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party initially supported the establishment of these councils as the fundamental unit of governance in a socialist society. The soviets played a key role in both the February and October Revolutions and were representative of various socialist parties in addition to the Bolsheviks (Furman, 2022). The first soviet, referred to as the Ivanovsky Soviet, was established in May 1905 in Ivanovo, while the Russian anarchist Volin claimed to have witnessed the emergence of the Saint Petersburg Soviet in January of the same year. The Russian working class was largely organized at the turn of the 20th century, resulting in government-endorsed trade union leadership. However, the strain placed on Russian industry during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) prompted a surge in strikes and rebellion among the working class (Bullock, 2011). The soviets represented an independent workers' movement that was no longer subject to government oversight of worker unions. These councils emerged in various industrial centers throughout Russia and were typically organized at the factory level. Although the soviets dissipated following the Revolution of 1905, they were revitalized under socialist leadership during the Russian Revolution. Lenin argued for the demolition of the foundations of the capitalist state and the implementation of an "ultra-democratic" dictatorship of the proletariat modeled after the system employed by the Paris Commune (Sirianni, 1982).

After the establishment of the Soviet Union, the organizational structure of the government included the election of workers' councils at the local level, which would then elect representatives to form regional councils, and so on up to the Congress of Soviets at the national level. The highest legislative body in the country was the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. However, the Bolshevik party, led by Lenin, only received a minority of the votes in the election for the Russian Constituent Assembly (Ticktin, 2016, pp. 19-23). As a result, Lenin disbanded the Assembly by force after its first meeting, citing the refusal of other socialist parties to honor the sovereignty of soviet democracy and arguing that parliamentary democracy, which was dominated by the bourgeoisie, could not fairly represent the working class. Lenin also claimed that the soviets, in which the Bolshevik party did receive a majority of the votes, more accurately reflected the changing opinions of the people. Following the revolution, the Bolshevik government was involved in World War I and the Russian Civil War, and some argue that the effects of these conflicts contributed to the decline of soviet

democracy and the emergence of a bureaucratic system with significant control over the Soviet Union. Some also point to the dissolution of city soviets in 1918 due to the return of non-Bolshevik socialist majorities as a significant blow to soviet democracy (Ticktin, 2016).

The Kronstadt rebellion of March, 1921 marked a significant event in the evolution of soviet democracy in Russia. Prior to this event, there had been widespread discontent among the population due to the implementation of policies comprising war communism, leading to strikes and demonstrations in various locations across the country. In response, the Bolshevik government imposed martial law and utilized the Red Army to suppress the protests, also implementing mass arrests by the Cheka (Getzler, 1983, pp. 73-74). However, these measures only temporarily alleviated the discontent, as demonstrations persisted in Petrograd that year, this time involving factory workers joined by sailors stationed on the island-fort of Kronstadt. The rebels demanded a series of reforms, including the reduction of Bolshevik privileges, the inclusion of socialist and anarchist groups in newly elected soviet councils, economic freedom for peasants and workers, the dissolution of the bureaucratic governmental organs established during the civil war, and the restoration of workers' rights for the working class. The demands of the Kronstadt rebellion were met with fierce opposition, as Red Army forces crushed the rebellion, leading to the deaths of a thousand rebels in battle and another thousand executed in the following weeks, with numerous others fleeing abroad or to the countryside (Getzler, 1983). The 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) coincided with these events, during which Lenin argued that soviets and the principle of democratic centralism within the Bolshevik party still ensured democracy.

However, in response to support for Kronstadt within Bolshevik ranks, Lenin also issued a "temporary" ban on factions within the party, a ban that remained in place until the revolutions of 1989 and is believed by some critics to have rendered the democratic procedures within the party a formality, enabling Stalin to further consolidate his authority under the party (Nove, 1993, pp. 82-83).

According to some historians, despite the top levels of the soviet system becoming highly bureaucratic, local levels of society remained relatively participatory, allowing for meaningful citizen involvement in their immediate circumstances. While individuals may have felt constrained in expressing negative opinions about the socialist system or Stalin, this local participation ultimately meant that relatively little was controlled by the government or party at the decree level.



### USA Democracy and Soviet Democracy: Differences

There are several key differences between Soviet democracy and democracy in the United States. Some of the main differences include:

**Political parties.** In the United States, there are multiple political parties, each representing different ideologies and policy positions. In Soviet democracy, there was only one party, the Communist Party, which held a monopoly on political power and controlled the soviets.

**Separation of powers.** In the United States, there is a separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. In Soviet democracy, the soviets were responsible for all three functions, with no separation of powers.

**Elections.** In the United States, elections are held regularly to determine the representatives at all levels of government. In Soviet democracy, elections were held, but the Communist Party had significant control over the process, and candidates were often selected based on their loyalty to the party rather than their policy positions.

**Civil liberties.** In the United States, citizens enjoy a wide range of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, religion, and the press. In Soviet democracy, these rights were often restricted or suppressed, and political opposition was not tolerated.

**Economic system.** The United States has a mixed economy, with both private and public ownership of property and a market-based system for allocating resources. In Soviet democracy, the economy was planned and controlled by the state, with most property owned by the state and little room for individual initiative or entrepreneurship.

### Contemporary Azerbaijan democracy in the light of Cultural relativism

As mentioned above, cultural relativism is a theory that holds that the values, beliefs, and practices of a culture should be understood and evaluated within the context of that culture, rather than being judged by the standards of another culture or by universal moral standards.

In the context of Azerbaijan democracy, cultural relativism suggests that the democratic practices and norms of Azerbaijan should be understood and evaluated

within the context of Azerbaijan's unique culture and history, rather than being judged against the standards of a different culture or by universal democratic principles. This means that it is important to consider the cultural, social, and historical factors that have shaped the development of democracy in Azerbaijan, and to understand how these factors have influenced the way democracy operates in the country.

One key aspect of Azerbaijan's culture that may influence its democracy is the country's strong authoritarian tradition from the USSR. Azerbaijan has a history of strong leaders who have held significant power, and this tradition may shape the way democracy functions in the country. Additionally, the country's geographic location and history of foreign influence may also have an impact on its democratic practices and norms.

Overall, cultural relativism suggests that it is important to consider the specific cultural context of Azerbaijan in order to fully understand and evaluate the country's democracy. By examining the ways in which cultural factors have shaped democracy in Azerbaijan, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the country's political system and how it operates.

The cultural relativism theory suggests that a society's political systems and practices should be evaluated within the context of its own culture, rather than being judged by the standards of other cultures. According to this perspective, democracy in Azerbaijan should be understood and evaluated in the context of the country's unique cultural, historical, and social factors.

One way to apply cultural relativism theory to the analysis of democracy in Azerbaijan is to consider the cultural values and beliefs that shape the country's political system and decision-making processes. For example, the role of tradition and respect for authority since the USSR may be more important in Azerbaijan than in other democracies, which could influence the way that political leaders are chosen and how decisions are made (Altstadt, 2017, pp. 34-36).

Another aspect to consider is the social and economic conditions that shape the country's political landscape. For example, Azerbaijan's oil wealth may play a significant role in its political system and decision-making processes, and the country's history of authoritarian rule from the USSR may have influenced the development of its democratic institutions (Altstadt, 2017, pp. 44-45).

Overall, cultural relativism theory suggests that it is important to consider the unique cultural, social, and economic factors that shape democracy in Azerbaijan, rather than simply evaluating the country's political system by the standards of other democracies.

According to cultural relativism theory, Azerbaijan's culture plays a significant role in shaping the way democracy is practiced and perceived in the country. For example, the country's traditional clan-based social structure coming from the period of Khanates may influence the way political power is distributed and exercised within the democratic system. Similarly, the country's strong religious and cultural traditions may shape the values and beliefs of the population, which in turn may influence the way they participate in the democratic process and make political decisions.

Overall, cultural relativism theory suggests that it is important to consider the unique cultural context of Azerbaijan in order to fully understand and evaluate the country's democracy. By taking into account the influence of culture on the democratic process in Azerbaijan, it is possible to gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the functioning of democracy in the country.

The historical evolution of democracy in Azerbaijan is complex and multifaceted. Azerbaijan has a long history of political and social upheaval, including periods of authoritarian rule and foreign domination during the USSR period, and international conflict as Nagorno Karabakh. The modern concept of democracy in Azerbaijan is influenced by a variety of factors, including the country's experiences with colonialism and Soviet rule, as well as its cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions.

Azerbaijan's current political system is a presidential republic, with the President serving as both head of state and head of government. The country has a unicameral parliament, the National Assembly, which is responsible for legislation and oversight of the executive branch. Elections are held regularly, and political parties and civil society organizations are allowed to operate relatively freely (Həsənov & Vəliyev, 2013, pp. 47-79).

In terms of the future perspective of democracy in Azerbaijan, it is difficult to predict with certainty. Cultural relativism theory suggests that the evolution of democracy in Azerbaijan will continue to be shaped by the country's unique cultural, historical, and political context. This may include factors such as the influence of traditional cultural values, the role of religion and ethnic identity, and the impact of globalization and international relations. Ultimately, the future of democracy in Azerbaijan will depend on the actions and decisions of the country's political leaders, civil society, and citizenry.

## Conclusion

As a result, cultural relativism is a philosophical and cultural theory that holds that the values, practices, and beliefs of a culture should be understood and judged within the context of that culture, rather than being judged against the standards of another culture or universal norms. This means that the concept of democracy may be understood and practiced differently in different cultures, and it is not appropriate to impose a particular understanding of democracy on a culture that may have different values and traditions.

In this context, in order to understand the historical evolution and current state of democracy in Azerbaijan, it would be necessary to examine a range of factors, including the country's political history, cultural values, economic and social conditions, and international relationships. It would also be important to consider the role of various actors, such as political parties, civil society organizations, and government institutions, in shaping the country's democratic development.

This means that democracy in Azerbaijan should be evaluated based on the specific cultural norms, values, and practices that exist within the country. According to cultural relativism, it is not fair or accurate to compare the democracy of Azerbaijan to that of other countries such as the USA, France etc. and apply universal standards of democracy to it. Instead, the cultural context of Azerbaijan must be taken into account when analyzing and understanding its democracy. This means considering the country's history, cultural traditions, and current social and political climate. Ultimately, cultural relativism suggests that Azerbaijan democracy should be evaluated on its own terms, taking into account the unique cultural context in which it operates.

## Disclosure statement

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