

# American Anthropologist

NEW SERIES

---

---

VOL. 47

JULY-SEPTEMBER, 1945

No. 3

---

---

## “DIFFUSION VS. EVOLUTION”: AN ANTI-EVOLUTIONIST FALLACY

By LESLIE A. WHITE

IT has been a contention of the Boas school of ethnology for many years that theories of cultural evolution are rendered invalid by the facts of diffusion. Thus Professor Robert H. Lowie says:<sup>1</sup>

One fact, however, encountered at every stage and in every phase of society, by itself *lays the axe to the root of any theory of historical laws*—the extensive occurrence of diffusion. Creating nothing, this factor nevertheless makes all other agencies taper almost into nothingness beside it in its effect on the total growth of human civilization. (Emphasis ours.)

In another place he observes:<sup>2</sup>

The extraordinary extent to which such diffusion has taken place proves that the actual development of a given culture does not conform to innate laws necessarily leading to definite results, such hypothetical laws being overridden by contact with foreign peoples.

Finally, Lowie states categorically that “diffusion plays havoc with any universal law of sequence.”<sup>3</sup>

In his numerous critiques of evolutionism, Alexander Goldenweiser frequently resorts to the supposed antithesis between diffusion and evolution. Thus:<sup>4</sup>

The theory of diffusion itself, when further elaborated, became a powerful foe of the simplicist evolutionary scheme . . . the acceptance of the phenomena of diffusion at their face value is in itself sufficient to negate the evolutionary scheme in its original form.

And,

A further argument against the stage theory in social evolution can be derived from the theory of diffusion. . . . It has been shown that every tribe develops its culture not merely out of its inner resources, but at least in part under the stimulation of extraneous cultural items coming from neighboring tribes. As such items in their origins are

<sup>1</sup> Lowie, 1920a, p. 434. (See bibliography at end of article.)

<sup>2</sup> Lowie, 1917a, p. 95.      <sup>3</sup> Lowie, 1937, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Goldenweiser, 1925a, p. 226.

obviously independent of the recipient culture, it follows that to admit them is to throw a monkey-wrench into the evolutionary scheme of necessary stages.<sup>5</sup>

In another place Goldenweiser cites as a "vital defect of the evolutionary approach" the failure of evolutionists "to appraise at their true worth the processes of cultural diffusion . . . to disregard it cannot but *prove fatal to any theory of historic development*."<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

In other critiques, also, Goldenweiser showed how "the theory of diffusion could be used as a weapon in the fight against uncritical evolutionism,"<sup>7</sup> but these are sufficient for our purpose.

Dr. Bernard J. Stern, in his biography of Lewis H. Morgan, has this to say about evolution and diffusion:<sup>8</sup>

This exposes at once the *inherent weakness of any evolutionary classification of culture*; all sequences are disturbed by borrowing of cultural traits from neighboring peoples. (Emphasis ours.)

Melville J. Herskovits and Malcolm M. Willey make the following contribution to the discussion:<sup>9</sup>

The earlier anthropologists and sociologists . . . posited parallel development in every people . . . . Complete systems, with stages of development, culminating in our own particular type of civilization, were posited by such early writers as Morgan, Spencer, Tylor, and others. However, it has been found that the other cultural mechanism, that of diffusion, constituted a grave stumbling-block to this *a priori* scheme of stage development. . . .

The belief that evolutionism is negated by diffusion extends beyond the members of the Boas school proper. Thus Professor A. Irving Hallowell, in an interesting survey of "Anthropology: Yesterday and Today,"<sup>10</sup> has this to say:

One of the most damaging lines of attack on evolutionary theories was the demonstration of the importance of diffusion in culture history. Ideas, customs, technologies, etc., constantly spread from one people to another . . . contacts between groups of different cultures have been one of the chief stimuli to culture growth and change, rather than invention, some "law" of social evolution. . . .

And Professor Ralph Linton states that<sup>11</sup>

The main weakness of their [the evolutionists] approach lay in their ignorance of the principles of diffusion. . . .

Thus we find the early evolutionists charged with "ignorance of the principles of diffusion", with failure "to appraise them at their true worth", and so

<sup>5</sup> Goldenweiser, 1937, p. 516.

<sup>6</sup> Goldenweiser, 1922, pp. 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Goldenweiser, 1933, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Stern, 1931, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Herskovits and Willey, 1923, p. 195.

<sup>10</sup> Hallowell, 1936.

<sup>11</sup> Linton, 1936b, pp. 382-383.

on. Goldenweiser goes even farther and accuses the evolutionists of having contempt for diffusion. After showing how "the diffusion of cultural features" marred "the harmony of his [the evolutionist's] beautifully balanced schemes", Goldenweiser remarks: "The evolutionist's weapon against the phenomena of historical contact was contempt."<sup>12</sup> And in another article he speaks of "the evolutionist's contempt for the processes of cultural borrowing."<sup>13</sup>

This is a singular accusation. We can understand how even mature and competent students could at times ignore certain facts or fail to appraise them at their full worth. But it is difficult to picture them regarding facts with contempt. It is hard to imagine a geologist with a contempt for erosion, or an astronomer with contempt for comets. But it is as easy to do this as to imagine Tylor viewing the travels of *patolli*, or Morgan the spread of white man's culture among Indian tribes, with contempt. Yet Goldenweiser states categorically that the evolutionist's weapon against diffusion was contempt. We fail to find justification for this judgment in the writings of the evolutionists, and Goldenweiser does not enlighten us further on this point.

As a matter of fact, the evolutionists of the Classical school were not unaware of the extent and significance of diffusion as a cultural process by any means. On the contrary, they were very much alive to its ubiquity and importance. We shall limit our citation of evidence to the two major leaders of the evolutionist school: Edward Burnett Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan.

One of the things that every graduate student in anthropology learns early in his course of study is how Tylor, "in a splendid example of historical reconstruction",<sup>14</sup> traced the diffusion of the piston bellows from Malaysia to Madagascar. In two noteworthy essays he argued in favor of a theory of diffusion of the Mexican game of *patolli* from Asia. His *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* abounds with examples of his recognition of the diffusionist process and appreciation of its significance. In *Primitive Culture* he emphasizes:<sup>15</sup>

... it must be borne in mind *how powerfully the diffusion of culture acts* in preserving the results of progress from the attacks of degeneration. (Emphasis ours.)

"Civilization", said Tylor, "is a plant much oftener propagated than developed".<sup>16</sup>

Obviously we find no contempt for diffusion on Tylor's part. On the contrary, he was, as Lowie has remarked, "very much alive to the influence of diffusion."<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, again to quote Lowie, Tylor "goes much further [as a diffusionist] than at all events modern American ethnologists are inclined to follow."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Goldenweiser, 1921, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Goldenweiser, 1925b, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Lowie 1920a, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Tylor, 1929, Vol. I, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Lowie, 1917b, p. 264. Goldenweiser, 1931, p. 661, too, notes that Tylor "recognized diffusion" and had discussed it "with insight and acumen."

<sup>18</sup> Lowie, 1917b, p. 265.

We turn now to Lewis H. Morgan. His work, too, abounds with references to diffusion. We select some examples from his *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*.<sup>19</sup>

It is a reasonable supposition that contiguous nations, and especially such as intermarry and maintain friendly intercourse, are constantly contributing of their vocables to each other's dialects. (p. 188)

The [Finnish] terms for collateral consanguinei may have been borrowed from Aryan sources, which is not improbable . . . (p. 62)

It is questionable whether the Mandans originated the partial civilization of which they were found possessed. There are strong reasons for believing that they obtained both their knowledge of agriculture and of house building from the Minnitarces. . . (p. 181)

From the Mandans and Minnitarces they [the Arickarces] undoubtedly learned the arts of cultivation and of housebuilding. (p. 198)

Such of the remaining nations as possess this relationship [cousin] borrowed it, with the term, from the Roman source; and it is probable that the Germans derived the conception from the same quarter . . . (p. 471)

Morgan went beyond an "awareness" of diffusion. He elevated it to the level of major importance as a process of culture change:

"Wherever a continental connection existed," he declared, "all the tribes must have shared in some measure in each other's progress."<sup>20</sup> Also,

Some of these inventions were borrowed, not unlikely, from tribes in the Middle Status; for it was by this process constantly repeated that the more advanced tribes lifted up those below them, as fast as the latter were able to appreciate and to appropriate the means of progress.<sup>21</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

Far from seeing in diffusion an obstacle to the evolutionary process, Morgan thinks of them as working together, hand in hand:

Institutions of government are a growth from primitive germs of thought. Growth, development and transmission, must explain their existence among civilized nations.<sup>22</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

Culture traits originate among some peoples and then diffuse to other tribes and nations:

Horticulture and other domestic arts spread from the Village Indians to the tribes in the Lower Status of barbarism, and thus advanced them materially in their onward progress toward the higher condition of the Village Indians. Numerous tribes were thus raised out of savagery into barbarism by appropriating the arts of life of tribes above them.<sup>23</sup>

Thus evolution and diffusion work together; the one process originates, the other spreads:

<sup>19</sup> Morgan, 1871.      <sup>20</sup> Morgan, 1878, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.      <sup>22</sup> Morgan, 1878, p. 508.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, 1881, p. 44.

In addition to this known [evolutionary] sequence of the means of progress . . . every nation upon a continent had one or more contiguous nations between whom and itself there was more or less of intercourse. Amongst contiguous nations there would be free propagation of arts and inventions. . . . Nations are apt to share in the more important elements of each other's progress.<sup>24</sup>

We have now demonstrated that neither Tylor nor Morgan, the outstanding leaders of the Evolutionist school in Europe and America, were "ignorant of the principles of diffusion," that neither one "failed to appraise the facts of diffusion at their true worth"; neither held diffusion in "contempt". On the contrary, they both recognized the diffusionist process everywhere, and both had a fine appreciation of its significance. As a matter of fact, they regarded it as a major process of culture change among peoples. And, far from seeing an antithesis between evolution and diffusion, they saw that these two processes work harmoniously together, the one originating culture traits, the other spreading them far and wide.

If prominent evolutionists like Morgan and Tylor recognized diffusion and appreciated its importance; if they saw no antithesis between diffusion and evolution, but on the contrary regarded them as complementary processes, how has it been possible for the Boas school to declare that diffusion negates evolution?

The answer is simple: the Boas school has confused the *evolution of culture* with the *culture history of peoples*. The evolutionists worked out formulas which said that a culture trait or complex B has grown out of trait or complex A, and is developing into, or toward, trait or complex C. In other words they describe a culture process in terms of stages of development. They say nothing about peoples or tribes. They do not say that *a tribe* has to go through stages A and B before arriving at stage C. They know full well that a tribe can obtain the culture of stage C by diffusion without ever going through stages A and B.

But the Boas school has tried to apply these formulas that describe a process of cultural development to the culture history of a people. Naturally the attempt failed; the cultural formulas have nothing to do with peoples. But instead of discovering their own mistake, the Boasians have rejected the evolutionists' formulas. Let us make the issue clear with an example.

The evolutionists described the development of writing as follows: first there was picture writing; out of this grew a form of rebus writing; and out of this emerged the alphabet form. What they have done is to describe a cultural process; they have said that these three stages follow one another in this order. They have said nothing about any tribe or nation, or about the order in which it might acquire one or another of these forms of writing. But members of the Boas school have applied formulas of this sort to specific tribes and peoples.

---

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, 1871, p. 448.

And when they found that a people might go directly from stage A to C, omitting stage B, they declared that the formula had been invalidated. Let us cite one more illustration.

One of the favorite arguments against evolutionism advanced by the Boas school has to do with iron-working among certain African tribes. They point out that these tribes went directly into an Iron Age from the Stone Age, omitting the ages of Copper and Bronze. Hence, they conclude, the evolutionist's sequence, stone-copper-bronze-iron, is invalid. Thus Goldenweiser writes:

. . . the evolutionist . . . posited the three stages: stone, bronze and iron. But in the only other [than Europe] culture area where the use of iron was known, namely, that of Negro Africa, the stage of iron followed directly upon that of stone, omitting the bronze stage.<sup>25</sup>

And Lowie says:

The African Stone Age was not superseded by a Copper Age, but directly by a period of Iron,<sup>26</sup> . . . the Africans did not pass from a Stone Age to an Age of Copper and Bronze and then to an Iron Age; . . . they passed directly from the manufacture of stone tools to the manufacture of iron tools.<sup>27</sup>

This is an interesting episode in the history of ethnological theory. One might get the impression from the Boas school that the evolutionists were not aware of these facts of African culture history, or if they were acquainted with them, that they did not appreciate their significance. But this is not the case; both Morgan and Tylor were familiar with them. Morgan, for example, after discussing the way in which "*foreign* elements intermingled with the native culture in sections of the Eastern hemisphere [have] produced an abnormal condition of society, where the arts of civilized life were remolded to the aptitudes and wants of savages and barbarians," remarks:

Iron has been smelted from the ore by a number of African tribes, including the Hottentots, as far back as our knowledge of them extends. After producing the metal by rude processes *acquired from foreign sources*, they have succeeded in fabricating rude implements and weapons.<sup>28</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

Tylor, speaking in general of the history of metallurgy, says:

In . . . districts, such as Polynesia, Central and South Africa and America (except Mexico and Peru), the native tribes were moved directly from the Stone to the Iron Age without passing through the Bronze Age at all.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Goldenweiser, 1922, p. 25; also 1937, pp. 513-514.

<sup>26</sup> Lowie, 1917a, p. 81.      <sup>27</sup> Lowie, 1920a, p. 437.

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, 1878, p. 463. On this same point Lowie, 1940, p. 371, says: "This example is easily explained by contact with a people of blacksmiths who taught the stone-using Negroes to forge iron tools."

<sup>29</sup> Tylor, 1910, p. 118.

Of Africa, specifically, he says:

Most of Africa, on the other hand, seems to have had no bronze age, but to have passed directly from the stone age to the iron age.<sup>30</sup>

Thus Morgan and Tylor were well acquainted with these facts before Goldenweiser and Lowie were born.

Granting that certain African tribes went directly from the stone age to the iron age, would this in any way invalidate the evolutionist's sequence<sup>31</sup> of Stone, Bronze, and Iron? Not in the least. The fact that a tribe gets a complex of traits from a foreign source by diffusion has nothing whatever to do with the series of stages in which this culture complex developed. Morgan and Tylor saw this clearly; the Boasians have not.

To return for a moment to the evolutionist's sequence of picture-writing, rebus (or hieroglyphic) writing, and alphabetic writing, does the fact that our Pueblo Indians today are proceeding directly from picture-writing to alphabetic writing, omitting the hieroglyphic stage, prove that the evolutionist's sequence is unsound? Manifestly not; it does not even touch it. Furthermore, neither Morgan nor Tylor was so naive as to believe that a given tribe had to pass through all the preceding stages of cultural development before it could take over the alphabet, the calendar and the multiplication table from its neighbors. What the evolutionists were doing was describing stages of cultural development, not tracing the culture history of tribes.

In opposing evolutionism with diffusion, Boas writes:<sup>32</sup>

We must try to understand more clearly what the theory of a unilinear cultural development implies. It means that *different groups of mankind* started at a very early time from a general condition of lack of culture . . . and developed everywhere approximately along the same lines, making similar inventions and developing similar customs and beliefs. (Emphasis ours.)

Also,<sup>33</sup>

Thus it does not seem to be certain that *every people* in an advanced stage of civilization must have passed through all the stages of development. (Emphasis ours.)

But what evolutionist ever said that *every people* had to pass through all the stages of development? They have said that *culture* must pass through certain stages of development, but they have not said that "different groups," "every people," etc., have to go through these stages. As we have already shown, Morgan and Tylor were well aware that tribes can and do take "short cuts" via diffusion.

<sup>30</sup> Tylor, 1916, p. 280.

<sup>31</sup> We might note at this point that Tylor once remarked that "it is a question whether men first worked copper or iron" (*ibid.*, p. 278).

<sup>32</sup> Boas, 1938, p. 178.      <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182 (1922 edition).

This misconception of Boas is shared by his students.

Thus Lowie writes:

There is another remarkable fact about the Negro Iron Age. While the Egyptians, Chinese and Babylonians first used bronze, the Negroes never passed through this stage but progressed directly from stone to iron. Some of them made copper and bronze objects, but simultaneously with iron ones. This is one of the clearest instances of how *different races* [our emphasis] need not pass through precisely the same stages of civilization.<sup>34</sup> . . . Hence the specious plea that a given people must pass through such or such a stage in *our* [Lowie's emphasis] history before attaining this or that destination can no longer be sustained.<sup>35</sup>

Bernhard J. Stern falls in line with:<sup>36</sup>

The cultural and social history of a people can be explained only in the light of its historical relations and cultural contacts, and not by any general universal scheme of evolution.

To quote Boas again, "Each cultural group has its own unique history." This leads him to disavow "uniform evolution the world over."<sup>37</sup>

To be sure each people has its own history, and this history is unique. It is absolutely true, as Stern says, that the culture history of a people can be explained only in terms of its own culture history, not in terms of an evolutionist formula. But the point is that no evolutionist—at least neither Morgan nor Tylor—ever said otherwise. They knew this as well as the Boasians. As we have said before, the evolutionist's formulas describe cultural processes, stages of cultural development. They are not applicable to the culture history of tribes and were not intended for this purpose. Let us hear what Tylor and Morgan have to say on this subject.

We begin with a quotation from Tylor in which he states explicitly and specifically that his concern is with *culture* rather than with tribes or nations:

If the field of enquiry be narrowed from History as a whole to that branch of it which is here called Culture, the history, *not of tribes or nations*, but of the condition of knowledge, religion, art, custom, and the like [in short, *culture*] among them, the task of investigation proves to lie within far more moderate compass.<sup>38</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

In another place Tylor says:

On the whole it appears that wherever there are found elaborate arts, abstruse knowledge, complex institutions, these are results of gradual development from an earlier, simpler, and ruder state of life. No stage of civilization comes into existence spontaneously, but grows or is developed out of the stage before it.<sup>39</sup>

Again Tylor:

<sup>34</sup> Lowie, 1934, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> Lowie, 1920*a*, p. 441.

<sup>36</sup> Stern, 1931, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> Boas, 1920, p. 317.

<sup>38</sup> Tylor, 1929, Vol. I, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Tylor, 1916, p. 20.



The details of Culture are capable of being classified in a great number of ethnographic groups of arts, beliefs, customs, and the rest; the consideration comes next how far the facts arranged in these groups are produced by evolution from one another.<sup>40</sup>

Tylor's conception is quite clear. He is concerned with culture, with the way in which one stage "is developed out of the stage before it," with the manner in which one group of culture traits "are produced by evolution from one another." He does not state, nor do his remarks imply or even allow of the intimation that "every people must pass through all the stages of development," as Boas claims. As a matter of fact, peoples—tribes or nations—are mentioned only to exclude them from the scope of his study.

Morgan, likewise, is concerned with tracing the course of cultural development from savagery, through barbarism, to civilization. He is talking about culture, not peoples, when he says:<sup>41</sup>

House architecture . . . can be traced from the hut of the savage through communal houses of the barbarians, to the house of the single family of civilized nations (p. 6). Subsistence has been increased and perfected by a series of successive arts, introduced at long intervals of time, and connected more or less directly with inventions and discoveries (p. 5).

Morgan states that "the gens has passed through successive stages of development,"<sup>42</sup> and that "the family can be definitely traced through several successive forms."<sup>43</sup> But we know of no place in which he says that each tribe must pass through all of these stages if it is to advance culturally. On the contrary, as we have seen from earlier quotations, Morgan believes that elements of kinship systems diffuse from one people to another.

In the evolution of writing, Morgan distinguishes five stages:<sup>44</sup>

1. Gesture Language . . . ; 2. Picture Writing . . . ; 3. Hieroglyphs . . . ; 4. Hieroglyphs of phonetic power . . . ; and 5, a Phonetic Alphabet.

Nowhere, so far as we know, does Morgan declare, or even imply that each tribe, everywhere, must go through the same series of stages of cultural development. On the contrary, he takes pains to show that

Through influences, derived from the higher races, the indigenous culture of many tribes has been arrested, and so far adulterated as to *change the natural flow of their progress*. Their institutions and social state *became modified* in consequence.<sup>45</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

He points out that the ancient Britons possessed iron, but that they had

<sup>40</sup> Tylor, 1929, Vol. I, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Morgan, 1878 (Holt edition).

<sup>42</sup> Morgan, 1881, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, 1878, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 529.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

not developed the metallurgical art themselves but had acquired it from "more advanced continental tribes."<sup>46</sup>

Finally, it is made clear by the passages which we have quoted earlier from Morgan's works, that he considered diffusion so common that many tribes did not have to develop various arts themselves but could borrow them ready-made from their neighbors. It was, as Morgan said, "by this process constantly repeated that the more advanced tribes lifted up those below them."<sup>47</sup>

In attributing to the evolutionists the belief that all peoples must pass through the same series of stages of cultural development, the Boas school has made them out to be a peculiarly unobserving and stupid group of men. Is it conceivable that Morgan, who was intimately acquainted with scores of Iroquoian Indians, could fail to observe that they adopted many traits from their white neighbors without going through the stages of evolution that were necessary to produce these traits? Did not Morgan see them learning to use the alphabet, the calendar and the multiplication table; adopting various tools, articles of clothing, elements of architecture; taking over ideas of money, social life, and Christianity? Is one to believe that Morgan was so obsessed with a formula that he could close his eyes to the facts before him and insist that the Seneca would have to go through a stage of hieroglyphic writing before they could adopt the alphabet; that they would have to use Roman numerals for a time before they could adopt the Arabic notation; that they would have to develop the calendar, metallurgy, and monotheism by themselves if they were ever to possess them? Even if Morgan had not supplied us with the evidence to prove the contrary, it would require considerable testimony and argument to convince us that he—or anyone else—could have been as blind, stubborn and stupid as the anti-evolutionists make him out to be.<sup>48</sup>

The same argument will hold true for Tylor, and we need not repeat it. To declare that he championed a theory that every people had to pass through the same series of stages of cultural development by themselves, without taking advantage of the resources of their neighbors, would be absurd.

The confusion between evolution of culture and culture history of peoples finds expression among the Boas group in another form: they are often unable to distinguish the evolutionist process from the historic process. This distinction can be made clear with a simple example. The description of writing which says that picture writing came first, out of this grew hieroglyphic writing, and out of this evolved the alphabet, is an example of the evolutionist process. It deals with writing in general, without reference to time or place. It deals with classes of phenomena, not with single and unique events. The *history* of writing

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.

<sup>48</sup> Remarks like the following are not uncommon in the anti-evolutionist literature of the Boasians: "It may be said categorically that even at his worst Morgan never perpetrated more palpable nonsense, and that is saying a good deal." (Lowie, 1920a, p. 389.)

is quite different. It says, for example, that in a certain place at a certain time a certain form of writing was found. In the Sinai peninsula, at a given time, a specific people invented the alphabet. The alphabet spread subsequently to this land and to that people at definite times where certain changes were made, and so on. In history the emphasis is upon the single event, unique in time and space.<sup>49</sup>

Now the Boas school has tried to make evolutionist formulas do duty as *history*. Thus Boas says:<sup>50</sup>

It would seem that an acceptable general theory of the *development of civilization* must meet the demand that the *historical happenings in any particular region conform* to it. (Emphasis ours.)

According to this reasoning, a general theory of the development of writing would have to conform to the historical happenings among the Seneca tribe in western New York between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. But the general theory does not "conform": the Senecas go directly from an incipient stage of picture writing to a full-fledged system of alphabetic writing. Therefore, the Boasians conclude, the general theory is invalid. Their reasoning is singular. It is like trying to use the geometric theorems of Euclid to ascertain the size and shape of Farmer Hawkins' hay field, and when you discover that the theorems will not give you this specific information ("will not conform to the historical happenings in the particular region") you declare that the theorems are invalid. You will go further, if you reason as Boas has done: you will assert not only that those particular theorems are invalid, but that geometry itself is a delusion; for Boas has concluded not only that certain evolutionist formulas are wrong but that the evolutionist process itself does not exist.

Professor Ruth Benedict similarly confuses history with evolution when she says:<sup>51</sup>

The historian is not helped in the reconstruction of Plantagenet England by any concept of the evolution of government; just as superfluous for him also, the anthropologist insists, is any scheme of cultures arranged according to an ascending scale of evolution.

The theorems of Euclid do not help us in measuring the hay field, therefore . . .

Edward Sapir expresses his confusion by calling evolutionism "pseudo-history."<sup>52</sup> Evolutionism is not pseudo-history; it is not history at all. An ac-

---

<sup>49</sup> Kroeber, 1923, discusses both the evolution of writing and the origin and history of the alphabet. He begins by stating that "three *stages* are logically distinguishable in the *development* of writing," (p. 263; emphasis ours). After discussing the evolution of writing he sketches the history of the alphabet.

<sup>50</sup> Boas, 1940, p. 340.

<sup>51</sup> Benedict, 1931, p. 810.

<sup>52</sup> Sapir, 1927, p. 101.

count of the evolution of writing is certainly not the same thing as the history of writing.

Goldenweiser crowns their argument with this penetrating observation:<sup>53</sup>

Had the evolutionists been historians rather than amateur anthropologists, the classical theory of social evolution would probably not have progressed beyond its early phases.

This is a remarkable conclusion to reach: if the early anthropologists had been historians instead of evolutionists, the theory of evolution would not have been developed very far. We can, of course, only agree with Goldenweiser. If these amateurs had been historians instead of evolutionists they would, naturally, have done history instead of evolution. There is little doubt about that. By the same token, if Beethoven had been a cobbler instead of a composer he would have made boots instead of symphonies. And if Napoleon had been a bookkeeper instead of a soldier. . . .<sup>54</sup> Goldenweiser, like Sapir and other members of the Boas group, is incapable of recognizing the evolutionist process in culture, and of distinguishing the historic process from the evolutionist process.<sup>55</sup> To them, evolution is merely history "gone wrong"—"pseudo-history," as Sapir calls it. As a matter of fact, such early "amateurs" as Morgan and Tylor were historians *as well as* evolutionists. But they were able to distinguish the one process from the other; they did not try to squeeze history out of evolutionist formulas.

A problem still confronts us: How has the Boas school fallen into such an error? Why have they accused the evolutionists of ignoring diffusion, of failing to appreciate its significance, or of regarding it with contempt, when the two outstanding members of the Evolutionist school have demonstrated an intimate acquaintance with the diffusion process and a complete understanding of the role it has played in culture history? Why have they declared that evolutionist theory postulated the necessity of each and every tribe progressing through the same series of stages of development when men like Morgan and Tylor not only never made such a claim but specifically and explicitly contradicted such an assumption? And finally, why have the Boasians used the facts of diffusion to refute evolutionist theory when it is plain, as Morgan showed, that evolution and diffusion are cultural processes that work harmoniously together? We shall not attempt to provide complete and adequate answers to these questions here. We shall do no more than to try to throw some light upon them.

In the first place, Boas and most of his disciples have always been ardent

---

<sup>53</sup> Goldenweiser, 1931, p. 661.

<sup>54</sup> Goldenweiser, it may be noted in passing, has been called "the philosopher of American anthropology," (Lowie, 1922, p. 235.)

<sup>55</sup> Cf. White, 1938 and 1945, for a discussion of the historic, evolutionist, and functionalist processes in culture as well as in biological and physical phenomena.

anti-evolutionists.<sup>56</sup> As Paul Radin has put it, the evolutionary view was challenged "notably by Boas . . . a good part of his energies and those of his school had to be devoted to disproving it."<sup>57</sup> Goldenweiser has written critique after critique of evolutionism. Something like the ardor that glowed so strongly in the breast of that staunch opponent of evolution and science, William Jennings Bryan, appears to have animated many members of the Boas school. Berthold Laufer was once moved to brand the theory of cultural evolution as "the most inane, sterile, and pernicious theory ever conceived in the history of science."<sup>58</sup> Bryan declared that "no more repulsive doctrine was ever proclaimed by man"<sup>59</sup> than the doctrine of evolution. With this philosophic outlook, therefore, we would expect the Boas school to be predisposed in favor of any theory that opposed evolution. When, therefore, a theory appeared which seemed to "lay the axe to the root of any theory of historical laws," they were sufficiently uncritical to accept it and to use it, as Goldenweiser expresses it, "as a weapon in the fight against uncritical [*sic*] evolutionism," and this for decades.

In the second place, we might ask if Boas and his students have read the works of the men they criticize. This may appear to be an ungenerous suspicion, but it is not the first time it has been raised. Father Wm. Schmidt, for example, has flatly accused two members of the Boas school, Edward Sapir and Paul Radin, of criticizing Graebner without having read his works—unless, as he says, we wish "to come to even less gratifying conclusions."<sup>60</sup> That our question is a fair one is indicated by the fact that a member of this group, Bernhard J. Stern, in his biography of one of the outstanding evolutionists, has declared that "Morgan nowhere in his books uses the word 'evolution',"<sup>61</sup> whereas this word appears on the *very first page* of Chapter I of the Kerr edition of *Ancient Society*, and twice in the first four pages of the Holt edition. It is found also in other books and articles by Morgan.<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to see how one who had read Morgan could have made such a claim. Franz Boas fails even to mention Morgan's name in his essay, "The History of Anthropology,"<sup>63</sup> although he remarks that his "sketch of the history of the prevailing tendencies in anthropology would be incomplete without a few remarks on the men who have made it what it is" (p. 522). Paul Radin has asserted that "to all Boas' disciples Morgan has since remained anathema and unread."<sup>64</sup> This is undoubtedly an exaggeration, for it is obvious that Lowie has read Morgan. Still it is difficult to see how Lowie could have read the passages in Morgan that have been

<sup>56</sup> Why Boas and his disciples have been anti-evolutionists is a question too big to be answered here. It is an interesting and important question, however, and one that we shall hope to consider at a later date.

<sup>57</sup> Radin, 1933, p. 4.      <sup>58</sup> Laufer, 1918, p. 90.      <sup>59</sup> Bryan and Bryan, 1925, p. 547.

<sup>60</sup> Schmidt, 1939, pp. 39, 55; see, also, p. 43, for the same charge leveled against an American anthropologist who was not a pupil of Boas.

<sup>61</sup> Stern, 1931, p. 23.      <sup>62</sup> Cf. White, 1944, pp. 224-225.

<sup>63</sup> Boas, 1904.      <sup>64</sup> Radin, 1939, p. 303.

quoted in this essay and have come to the conclusion that diffusion negates evolution.

Thirdly, and finally, we believe that the Boas school has been led into the confusion of the evolution of culture with the history of peoples by the uncritical use of such expressions as "a culture," or "a given culture."

We have seen how the Boasians have declared that evolutionist theory required "each people," "different races," etc., to pass through the same series of stages of cultural development. This confusion of *peoples* with *culture* is obvious enough, and would no doubt have been apparent to the Boas group had they not been eager to destroy so objectionable a doctrine as that of evolution. But they occasionally present their argument in other words, saying that evolutionist theory required "a given culture" to pass through a certain series of stages of development. The argument now takes on subtleties, for what is "a given culture?" Is this a *cultural* category or an *ethnic* category? Is its referent *culture* or *people*? We shall see that it is ambiguous; it means now one thing, now another. It makes it easy to slide from a study of developmental processes *in culture* to a consideration of the cultural experiences of *a people* without being aware that you have changed premises in mid-syllogism. Let us illustrate with an example:

Lowie states that

the extraordinary extent to which such diffusion has taken place proves that the actual development of a *given culture* does not conform to innate laws necessarily leading to definite results, such hypothetical laws being overridden by contact with foreign peoples.<sup>65</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

Ralph Linton speaks of

A belief in the unilinear evolution of all institutions and cultures, that is, that *all cultures* had passed or were passing through exactly the same stages in their upward climb.<sup>66</sup> (Emphasis ours.)

What is *a culture*? The ordinary answer would be, A culture is the culture belonging to a tribe or to a region, such as Seneca culture or Plains culture. Seneca culture would therefore be that portion of the culture of the human species that is possessed by a tribe called Seneca; Plains culture would be that portion of human culture that is found in a certain geographic region. A trait is not an element of Seneca culture unless it is (or was) possessed by the Seneca tribe; similarly, a trait is not an element of Plains culture unless it is found in the Plains area (or came from that region). We see, then, that in each case the determining factor is something that lies outside culture itself. If a trait from another tribe should diffuse to western New York and become accepted by the Seneca tribe it becomes an element of Seneca culture; likewise, if a

<sup>65</sup> Lowie, 1917a, p. 95.

<sup>66</sup> Linton, 1936a, p. 314.

trait—the horse, for example—enters the Plains area and is adopted it becomes a part of Plains culture. So far so good. "Seneca" and "Plains" are here used merely as convenient labels for groups of phenomena. But some anthropologists have not stopped here. They have conceptualized "Seneca" culture so as to represent it as if it were a self-contained cultural entity. They have said, for example, that evolutionist theory requires that *Seneca* culture, or *Plains* culture, pass through a certain series of stages of development. And here they have run into error and confusion.

Since Seneca culture can mean only that portion of human culture that is associated with the Seneca tribe, it follows that Seneca culture can mean only the doings and experiences of the Seneca people. In short, to say that Seneca culture must pass through a certain series of stages is only a disguised way of saying that the Seneca *people* must pass through such and such stage. Or, in the case of the Plains, that such and such a *region* must pass through such a series. Now the evolutionists never said anything like this. They have said that *culture*, in general, or in certain of its aspects, such as writing, metallurgy, or social organization, must pass through certain stages. But they never maintained that certain tribes or regions had to do so.

Strictly speaking, there is no such *cultural* category as Seneca or Plains culture, any more than there is such a thing as English mathematics, Kansas horses, or Plains climate. To be sure, if by Seneca culture you mean no more than "that portion of human culture that happens to be associated with a tribe called Seneca," no objection is to be raised against it. On the contrary, it is to be commended for its brevity and economy. Similarly, no one would object to "English mathematics," "Kansas horses," or "Plains climate," if it were clear that what was meant was "that portion of the mathematics developed by the human race that is associated with a people called English," "those members of *Equus caballus* that are to be found within the boundaries of the state of Kansas," and "the meteorological conditions found in the region known as the Plains," respectively. But it is fairly obvious that English is not a category within the class *mathematics*; Kansas is not a category within the class *horses*; and Plains is not a meteorological category. There are Percheron and Arabian horses, draft and saddle horses, five-toed and hoofed horses, but no *Kansas* horses that can be distinguished zoologically from Nebraska horses. There are arid, torrid, frigid, humid, temperate, climates, but no Plains climate.

But certain anthropologists have talked about Seneca culture and Plains culture as if they were *cultural* categories rather than ethnic and geographic referents. Consequently they have been led to apply the evolutionist's cultural formulas to them, saying "Seneca culture must, according to the evolutionist's formula, pass through such and such stages." When, therefore, they find that the Senecas alter their culture by borrowing, and, as a people, skip certain

stages, they say that the evolutionist's formula is invalidated. Evolutionist formulas are applicable to such things as the long house, the confederacy, or to other cultural features, but not to the peoples themselves.

Certainly one of the dominant notes in ethnological theory during recent decades has been that of anti-evolutionism. Just as the philosophy of cultural evolution dominated the era of Morgan, Spencer and Tylor, so has the reactionary philosophy of anti-evolution prevailed to a great extent in our own day. The repudiation and rejection of evolutionism has been one of the principal theoretical contributions of the Boas School.<sup>67</sup> One of the most potent weapons in the anti-evolutionist's arsenal has long been the argument that diffusion negates evolution. This argument is, as we have demonstrated, fallacious. It rests upon an error of logic: the confusion of things that are different and distinct—the evolution of culture and the culture history of peoples. With the exposure of this error the principal support of the anti-evolutionist position is removed.

The triumph of the "diffusion negates evolution" argument and its success for so many years presents an interesting problem for the student of the behavior of scientists and of the growth of scientific tradition. How could an error, which when exposed seems almost absurdly obvious, have had such a run? Dispassionately one wonders how a man (Boas) who has been hailed as "the foremost champion of scientific method in the field" (Lowie<sup>68</sup>), "the greatest of living anthropologists" (Benedict<sup>69</sup>), could have committed such an error. One wonders, too, how it could have been accepted and perpetuated by more than one generation of Boas' students. It is indeed a remarkable phenomenon, one that invites reflection upon the nature of tradition among scientists.

We have shown in an earlier article<sup>70</sup> how error, once established in anthropology, may be perpetuated indefinitely. We seem to have another example of this here. Graduate students have been taught for years that the facts of diffusion "lay the axe to the root of any theory of cultural evolution." They grow

---

<sup>67</sup> Anti-evolutionism has not, of course, been confined to the Boas group. The Kulturkreis—or as its leader, Father Wm. Schmidt prefers to call it, the Cultural Historical—school is also vigorously anti-evolutionist. Many if not most of the prominent members of this school are Roman Catholic priests, who, as Clyde Kluckhohn (1936, p. 173) has pointed out, "are almost compelled to reject 'Evolutionismus'" because of their adherence to the tenets of their church. The anti-evolutionism of the Kulturkreis group rests, therefore, upon the firm foundation of Catholic dogma. The source and basis of the anti-evolutionist philosophy of the Boas group are not nearly as obvious. The similarity of anti-evolutionist spirit and outlook of the two schools is indicated, however, by the enthusiasm and satisfaction with which Albert Muntz, S.J., and Henry S. Spalding (1928, pp. 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 20, 23, 24, etc.) cite Professor Lowie for his assaults upon evolution in general and L. H. Morgan in particular.

<sup>68</sup> Lowie, 1920b, p. 186. In this review, Lowie praises Cory for having freed himself from the "incubus of the unilinear evolution dogma."

<sup>69</sup> Benedict, 1940, p. vii.

<sup>70</sup> White, 1944.



up, write books, and teach new generations of students that diffusion negates evolution. And so the error grows, gaining authority with added years. And, lest anyone think that this particular error has lost its vigor, that it has grown feeble with the decline of Boas' dominance, or has disappeared with the death of the master, we call attention to a recent article in the *AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST*. In an essay entitled "On the Concept of Culture and some Cultural Fallacies,"<sup>71</sup> David Bidney reports that:

As Boas and other American anthropologists have established, the historical diffusion of customs and artifacts plus the empirical evidence concerning the diversity of cultural sequences has rendered the evolutionary theory of natural laws of cultural development untenable (pp. 41-42).

The error is still alive and appears to be flourishing. One can only wonder how much longer it will persist.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### BENEDICT, RUTH

1931 *The Science of Custom* (The Making of Man; V. F. Calverton, ed.) The Modern Library, New York.

1940 *Race: Science and Politics*. New York.

##### BIDNEY, DAVID

1944 *On the Concept of Culture and Some Cultural Fallacies*. *American Anthropologist*, 46: No. 1, 30-44.

##### BOAS, FRANZ

1904 *The History of Anthropology*. *Science*, 20: No. 512, 513-524.

1920 *The Methods of Ethnology*. *American Anthropologist*, 22: No. 4, 311-321.

1938 *Mind of Primitive Man* (Revised edition). Macmillan Co., New York.

1940 *Ethnological Problems in Canada* (Race, Language and Culture). New York.

##### BRYAN, WM. JENNINGS, AND MARY BAIRD BRYAN

1925 *The Memoirs of Wm. Jennings Bryan*. Philadelphia.

##### GOLDENWEISER, ALEXANDER

1921 *Four Phases of Anthropological Thought*. Proceedings of the 16th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Society, 16.

1922 *Early Civilization*. New York.

1925a *Cultural Anthropology* (History and Prospects of the Social Sciences; H. E. Barnes, ed.) New York.

1925b *Diffusion and the American School of Historical Ethnology*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 31: No. 1, 19-38.

1931 *Evolution, Social*. *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, 5, pp. 656-662.

1933 *Anthropology and Psychology* (History, Psychology and Culture). New York.

1937 *Anthropology*. New York.

##### HALLOWELL, A. IRVING

1936 *Anthropology: Yesterday and Today*. *Sigma Xi Quarterly*, 24, No. 3, pp. 161-169.

##### HERSKOVITS, MELVILLE J., AND M. M. WILLEY

1923 *The Cultural Approach to Sociology*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 29: No. 1, 188-199.

<sup>71</sup> Bidney, 1944.

## KLUCKHOHN, CLYDE

- 1936 *Some Reflections on the Method and Theory of the Kulturkreislehre*. American Anthropologist, 38: No. 2, 157-196.

## KROEBER, A. L.

- 1923 *Anthropology*. New York.

## LAUFER, BERTHOLD

- 1918 Review of *Culture and Ethnology* by R. H. Lowie. American Anthropologist, 20: No. 1, 87-91.

## LINTON, RALPH

- 1936a *Error in Anthropology* (The Story of Human Error; Joseph Jastrow, ed.). New York.  
1936b *The Study of Man*. New York.

## LOWIE, ROBERT H.

- 1917a *Culture and Ethnology*. New York.  
1917b *Obituary of E. B. Tylor*. American Anthropologist, 19: No. 2, 262-268.  
1920a *Primitive Society*. New York.  
1920b Review of *The Intellectuals and the Wage Workers* by H. E. Cory. American Anthropologist, 22: No. 2, 186.  
1922 *Primitive Culture*. The Freeman, 6, Nov. 15.  
1934 and 1940 *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. New York.  
1937 *History of Ethnological Theory*. New York.

## MORGAN, LEWIS H.

- 1871 *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*. Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, 17. Washington.  
1878 *Ancient Society* (Holt Edition). New York.  
1881 *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines*. United States Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region. Contributions to North American Ethnology, 4.

## MUNTSCHE, ALBERT, S. J., AND HENRY S. SPALDING

- 1928 *Introductory Sociology*.

## RADIN, PAUL

- 1933 *The Method and Theory of Ethnology*. New York.  
1939 *The Mind of Primitive Man*. The New Republic, 98, No. 1272, pp. 300-303.

## SAPIR, EDWARD

- 1927 *Anthropology and Sociology* (The Social Sciences and Their Interrelations; Wm. F. Ogburn and Alexander Goldenweiser, eds.). New York.

## SCHMIDT, FATHER WM.

- 1939 *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology*. New York.

## STERN, BERNHARD J.

- 1931 *Lewis Henry Morgan: Social Evolutionist*. Chicago.

## TYLOR, EDWARD B.

- 1910-1911 *Anthropology*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed.  
1916 *Anthropology*. Appleton, New York.  
1929 *Primitive Culture*. London.

## WHITE, LESLIE A.

- 1938 *Science is Sciencing*. Philosophy of Science, 5: No. 4, 369-389.  
1944 *Morgan's Attitude Toward Religion and Science*. American Anthropologist, 46: No. 2, 218-230.  
1945 *History, Evolutionism and Functionalism: Three Types of Interpretation of Culture*. Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, 1: No. 2. (In press).