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Grant Arndt

Paul Radin

HAN ON THE WEB: With a view to the future, we are establishing a HAN website at

<http://anthro.spc.uchicago.edu/han/>

As of press time, there is nothing to be found there save our logo, but we do plan to develop the site over the next several months. The format and content categories are not yet definite, and we welcome suggestions as to the sorts of material that might be included. Although we do not plan to include current numbers of HAN as such, the site will probably offer selected material from past volumes, as well as "between numbers" bibliography.

FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Burckhardtian Culture History and the "Durkheim-Mauss Bug" in Paul Radin's Letters to Edward Sapir

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Paul Radin was one of the most heterodox anthropologists among the first generation of Franz Boas' students. His primary theoretical works, Primitive Man as a Philosopher (1927) and Method and Theory in Ethnology (1933), reflect a characteristic interest in the role of individuals in "primitive" cultures (a description he used with a degree of irony), and in a humanistic, rather than scientific form of ethnology. Two letters from Radin's correspondence with Edward Sapir provide insight into the development of his idiosyncratic approach to anthropology. Written during the period (1913-1917) when Radin was employed through annual contracts by the Geological Survey of Canada (then headed by Sapir) to do research on the Ojibwa Indians of southeast Ontario (DuBois 1960:xi, Sacharov n.d.), they anticipate the key themes of Radin's main published theoretical works. The first letter, from early 1914, contains a critique of Boas, not unusual among the first generation of students in this period, but one which Radin would later elaborate (and extend to Sapir and other Boasians) in Method and Theory of Ethnology (1933). The letter provides a succinct introduction to Radin's notion of "culture history," a research agenda very different than the contemporary approaches of other Boasians such as Sapir, or than that subsequently developed in recent decades by proponents of historical anthropology or ethnohistory. Radin's criticism of Boas for having "not once told [his students] to study the Indian as individuals" in the first letter is picked up and elaborated in the second letter, written two years later. Judging by the letter's contents, the occasion seems to have been the publication in Science that week of Clark Wissler's "Psychological and Historical Interpretations of Culture" (1916). Radin's critique of "the French school" is pertinent for its unique framing of his interest in the individual in sociological terms. In the later Method and Theory, Radin programmatically distinguished his own culture historical approach from "sociological" and other approaches to ethnology. His suggested temperamental typology of the "intellectual, emotional and man of action" later appeared much more prominently in Primitive Man as Philosopher (1927). The second typology of "the religious, moderately religious, and non-religious" temperaments had already appeared in his "Religion of the North American Indians" (1914) and is an important presupposition of his analysis of the text he published as Crashing Thunder: the Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian (1926). Radin's discussion of the "intellectual whims" of the "four Semites" (Sapir, Lowie, Goldenweiser, and himself) in the introductory paragraph of the second letter adds to our awareness of the already recognized propensities of the early Boasians to look to the

humanities for respite from the "tyranny of modern science." It is, moreover, as characteristic a statement of Radin the man as the remainder of both letters is of Radin the theorist.

Hotel Vendome, Sarnia, Ontario

Jan. 27, 1914

Dear Sapir,

I sent you a business letter this morning—this is intended as an intellectual feast! I will wade right into my subject.

What you say about Boas doesn't surprise me. After careful reflection, during the last year I have come to the conclusion that it is not legitimate to regard Boas' faults of commission and omission as little foibles. On the contrary, they are basic characteristics and affect and have affected his work at all times. If in this letter, I dwell almost exclusively on Boas' faults, you will of course not forget that I appreciate keenly his achievements and that we all have paid him his [mede] of praise, even hero worship. I sincerely believe that Boas' work is done. He was at his best in opening up vistas and applying a commonsense method to ethnology. The originality of his method has it is true been over estimated, as anyone trained in modern history can see, but considering the conditions in which he found scholarship in the [18]80s and 90s—really then an apparent adjunct of biology—his work was both opportune and effective. He touched on every phase of ethnology and achieved wonders in suggesting problems, working one out here & there, but then he stopped. I maintain that he stopped not because one man could not do more, but emphatically because he does not possess the genius required for that kind of work. What is needed now is an historian, a man with a sense of historical growth and a man with constructive inspiration. Boas has neither of these talents, as is manifest by his attitude towards languages and the fact that in ethnology he has not once insisted on the dynamic aspects of the subject. He is an anatomist, but not a physiologist. Indeed I have never heard him in his lectures express the slightest desire "to see the wheels go around."

Another defect is that he lays too much stress on establishing the truth of certain general factors, like dissemination, convergent evolution, independent origin, etc. No real historian ever worries much about these things in the rough. What he wants to obtain is an intimate picture of how a people lived, worked, ate—for my part urinated—but it should be intimate. To imagine for one minute, that a real historian is—or should be—interested merely in the development of a culture is lop-sided. Many of course do think so & Boas shares this trait with them. But unfortunately that is the one thing in which ethnology differs from history. It may be deplored, but it is nevertheless a fact that chronology is and will always be impossible in primitive culture and any attempt to reconstruct one will be artificial & what is worse vague. It is essential to recognize this fact and the corollary it entails, that corollary being—turn to the other aspect of ethnology—that of complete, comprehensive and sympathetic interpretation. From this point of view ethnology can be made a real human science instead of one of bones and dust. It is only from this angle likewise that she can stimulate history, for naturally with the small number of individuals to be dealt with, as a rule—a picture can be obtained of individual variation, of the play of individual forces, that is wholly impossible in history of the past but that will unquestionably play a great role in the new history of the present & the future.

To all these things Boas has been indifferent. He has insisted on analytical examinations, warned us against taking an analysis as historical demonstration, yet he has not once told us to study the Indians as individuals. Thus all the real points of social organization, religion, mythology—as a literary product, have escaped him. "Methodology" is excellent, his insistence

upon the fairly correct one that he formulated will constitute one of his achievements--but it is only the beginning. Goldie [Alexander Goldenweiser], if he doesn't look out, will follow in his footsteps without having Boas' justification.

There is also one other thing about Boas and for that matter about Goldie & Lowie. They are afraid to be wrong, & being afraid to be wrong, they will not hazard interpretation. If they do not put this out of their constitutions, they will fall short of ever even remotely understanding primitive people. You must have the ability to put yourself in another man's place--knowing nevertheless that you are not the other man--and try to feel like him. Your data must of course be kept separate from your interpretation, but you must have the guts to interpret. I'm going to do it with the Winnebago and shall consider myself engaging in a legitimate enterprise, if I get as near the truth as Burckhardt did in his "Cultur der Renaissance." Wish me luck!

My critique of Boas sounded to my ears, at first, like an obituary notice, but the line I improved toward the end gave it something of the nature of an epitaph. However, even I cannot stand the strain of further literary output, so will close, with love to your wife, your reading of her "love" as regard to the contrary notwithstanding.

Yours,
Radin

Santa Fe, N.Mex.
Feb. 19, 1916

Dear Edward;

I just received your letter and it made me think of the fact that we anthropologists, i.e. the four Semites who graduated under Boas, are either an unusual aggregation of men or a self-centered set who insist upon giving in to their intellectual whims whenever the spirit prompts them. Here I am inveighing against the tyranny of modern science which insists that you do original research and hack work, when it is so much better for your soul and your mind to lie on your back and gaze into a New Mexican sky, walk into the mountains, or, still better, read history of Greek and Latin, while Lowie until recently wanted to write and read philosophy and Goldie wanted to read books like Levy-Bruhl and Durkheim. Now come you with your composing and delight in modern literature! Thank the lord it is so. I, for my part, would far prefer to live on \$600 a year "somewhere in France or Italy" than be compelled to work at Anthropology at six times that salary. To cultivate anthropology in the old way has not, as you know, appealed to me for the last two years and the only thing that makes the study of primitive people of interest to me is the possibility I vaguely descry of writing an interpretive study of the Winnebago or Ojibwa or, (unless the European War ends too soon), of the Bella Coola. Whether such an undertaking would be of any permanent scientific value to the world I do not know, and I do not much care, but I know that it would be of permanent value to me and satisfy certain aesthetic cravings of mine that field-work threatened for a time to dull. What I would most like to devote myself to is a history of the unintellectual class of Europe and I believe that the training I have had in anthropology and my enduring affection for history ought to stand me in good stead. Naturally I would want to do this in Italy or southern France, where one does not resent the passing of the years as here in America.

However let me sober up a little. Have you read Wissler's vice-presidential address? It disappointed me keenly. His separation of what is to be left to the professional psychologist and

what to the anthropologist seems to me to be puerile in the extreme. Why should a man who can define accurately what constitutes the process of thought, of imagination etc. be more correct in his interpretation of the individual than a thoughtful anthropologist? And barring certain technical information, is not every thoughtful anthropologist as good a psychologist as the psychologist, even although he does not know the difference between the modern and the older theories of color perception, for instance? And again what is all this metaphysics about the activity of complexes of human groups from which the "permanent individualities and the equipment by birth" are excluded? To say that the question of the behaviour of man as an individual is a problem for the psychologist to determine, that any anthropologist's contribution thereto is, from the nature of the case, as naive as the psychologist's interpretation of cultural phenomena appears to be to the anthropologist, seems to indicate that Wissler has been bitten by the Durkheim-Mauss bug, known in America by only one species, [Wilson] Wallis Oxfordgensis. By what magical process has Wissler arrived at an understanding of the group activities, if he, not being a psychologist, has no moral or other right to investigate the behaviour of the individual? The fundamental question involved here is to determine the relation of the individual to the group, to discover in how far the group is really the mere union of individuals described in terms of certain individualities, intellectual, emotional or men of action or in how far it transcends them. Before he discusses this preliminary problem his definition of cultural phenomena as "the acquired activity of complexes of human groups" is rather meaningless and represents no improvement over those advanced by the "meddling psychologist." For me the nature and origin of human culture can only be approached in one way and that is the following. I do not much care at which end you begin, whether with the individual or the group. It is admitted that the problem to be discussed is the nature and the origin of the group. We know that group activities are performed by a number of individuals, therefore, the first thing to study is the information possessed by these individuals and the manner in which they act. We know however that an individual living apart from other individuals is more or less an abstraction[,] that it does not occur in fact. All this is of course admitted. But this does not at all prevent the activities of a dozen people performing a ceremony from being merely the activities of twelve distinct individuals. Now whether each one of these individuals has the identical feeling, while performing the ceremony, is one of the questions to be determined. From the few observations that I have made, this is not a fact. Every individual has a characteristically different way of emotionally approaching the ceremony, due to his peculiar temperament, or lack of it, or his particular experiences in life. The unity that is so frequently predicated of the group while performing a ceremony is, in reality, merely apparent and consists very likely in a marked similarity in the performance of certain purely external functions. For purposes of general description it may be necessary to discard many of the details of individual behaviour, both objective and subjective, but we must never forget that such a description is extremely defective. It is an average and contains, or ought to contain, as much truth as an average. That is the first, perhaps rather trite point that I wish to make. But does it even contain as much truth as an average? I doubt it. One of the essential characteristics of an average is that the majority of cases should approximate, within certain degrees, to this average. If, to give an example, I take a deeply religious individual and study him, how near am I to understanding the average attitudes of two dozen men performing a ceremony, or to the average point of view on religious matters? I insist that I am not very near. For that reason, it seems to me, only that description which takes at least three types of temperaments into consideration--adhering now to the case of religion--, the intensely religious man, the intermittently religious man and non-religious man, can make any claim toward being even a moderately acceptable average. In other aspects of culture it may be necessary to make either more or fewer divisions. That will have to be determined upon. My second point then is that the average used be not so general as to be meaningless.

Now group activities, it will be admitted by all, are the activities of individuals. We know however that the French School claims that when acting in groups, the activities transcend those of the myriad individuals who actually compose the groups. Let us admit that this is true, for the moment. The real difficulty with which, in my opinion, this school is confronted is not so much the proof of this general proposition as the manner in which they try to demonstrate it in detail. I don't care to go into too great detail in this letter, but in general it may be said that the French theorists adopt a method of proof that sins against the point I made before, they do not employ acceptable averages. They as a matter of fact, go even further, water their average and forget completely that they are averages. As for the general proposition as such, all it means is that the relations of men and women living in a state of society are capable of so many permutations and combinations that no accurate description is possible, that all we can possibly hope for is an approximation. We must then, once and for all, give up any attempt to treat Anthropology as a natural science, to seek for laws. If that means, as friend Lowie once insisted, that anthropology and history are consequently merely branches of belles lettres, we will have to let it go at that.

Well, that'l [sic] be all for today. It has taken me three weeks to finish this letter. Please send on the two pieces of music you spoke of and, if you can, your manuscript on Method.

Now that the new fiscal year is fast approaching I am anxiously awaiting the arrival of my new contract.

Love to Mrs. Sapir.
Yours, Radin

Acknowledgements: The two Radin letters are reproduced by permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Correspondence Edward Sapir Paul Radin, cat. Number I-A-236M

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SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Archives of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL)—Dedicated to the preservation of archeological records "from Texas and adjacent areas," TARL (at the University of Texas, Austin) contains materials "documenting the history of anthropology and archeology in Texas dating back to the early 1900s. A 93 page Guide to the historic materials of the TARL edited by Gail L. Bailey, published in 1997, includes text and illustrations relating to the history of TARL, as well a detailed inventory of 180 linear feet of manuscript collections relating to the