

FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Kroeber, White, and Bidney: Triangulating the Superorganic

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What follows is discussion of a triangular correspondence among A.L. Kroeber, Leslie White, and David Bidney during the decade following World War Two. The first two men need no introduction, but the third may. Bidney first essayed to be American anthropology's philosopher by summing and synthesizing its several theoreticians, Kroeber among them. He published articles in the early post-World War II years and throughout the 1950s, and wrote an ambitious book, Theoretical Anthropology (1953/1967). By the mid-1960s he had largely passed from the scene. Kroeber used Bidney as a foil in his half-friendly duel with White over history and evolution, a triangular circuit of which Bidney may not have been aware.

Alfred Louis Kroeber is regarded as a ranking, if occasionally heretical Boasian whose credentials as Boasian lay chiefly in devotion to empirical research and the defense of Franz Boas in several professional crises. However, his anthropological epistemology was largely at odds with the Boasian program, a tension most apparent in his linguistic efforts prior to 1920 (in cooperative competition with Edward Sapir), as well as in his latter-life enterprise, which can be summed as the natural-cultural history of whole civilizations. Kroeber believed in cultures, but his devotion was to Culture. Of all his theoretical writings, "The Superorganic" (1917), his persistent notion of Culture, drew the most fire over decades. He never really fought shy of this partly Spencerian, partly Durkheimian, and partly Teutonic-Romantic emergent evolutionary concept. He had to qualify it often, and disavowed it at least once (1952: 23), but it re-emerged in different forms in his work. His 1917 article announcing this world-view contained seeds of several idées fixes in his career: the spatial-temporal grouping of geniuses, the utility of statistics in analyzing culture traits, and Darwinian evolution as a model to be emulated as method, if not for thinking about cultural evolution. The Superorganic encompassed his greatest differences from the Boasian Ascendancy during the early stages of his career. In his last years, when he was unaccountably held to be an authority on evolution (1960), it constituted his strongest claim to have thought about general cultural evolution.

Sapir and Clyde Kluckhohn both strongly criticized the Superorganic, and Kluckhohn, together with David Bidney, nudged Kroeber away from it temporarily during the early 1950s. Leslie White pulled him back. White did not accept Kroeber's version of the Superorganic unreservedly, but used a similar conceptual framework in his "Culturology" and for his model of cultural evolution. Here Kroeber's Boasian persona did him a disservice, for he was so wary of the term "evolution" that, like Holmes' celebrated dog that failed to bark in the night, for almost all of his professional life its absence left lacunae in his work. This may have been his greatest missed opportunity, for it is reasonably clear that his notion of cultural evolution was quite close to White's. He maintained several times in correspondence that their views were similar, but due to polity or to discretion declined to say this in print, and by the 1950s White was well past having to defer to him as an intellectual progenitor or call upon him as a patron. Harris (1968: 332), anxious to minimize Kroeber's influence, focused upon his untoward reluctance to credit

the evolutionary ideas of his most accomplished student, Julian Steward, and was therefore puzzled by White's approval of Configurations of culture growth (Kroeber 1944). Nor could Harris see what White saw clearly: that much of what Kroeber wrote suggested cultural evolution, even necessitated it, without invoking it. Furthermore, Kroeber's notion of cultural evolution was of the nineteenth century variety. Others saw this. For example, Wolf (1964: 57-59) wrote that Kroeber and White had broken with relativism and "...returned American anthropology to an ancestral problem ...the central concern of Lewis Henry Morgan and the evolutionists, to a view of the cultural process as universal, moving along a continuum from... primitive to civil society."

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Leslie White became anthropology's enfant terrible during the early post-war years, but laid his groundwork well before. In "Science is sciencing" (1938) he insisted that culture was as open to scientific investigation as other natural phenomena. This he might have had from Kroeber, whose Superorganic pre-supposed it, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) were still pointing out nearly 15 years later. White exhibited additional debts to Kroeber (1915, 1917, 1918, 1936), particularly in arranging natural phenomena alongside the sciences that explained them on emergent levels. In "Mind is minding" (1939), he dispensed with the need for human minds as objects of scientific interest, identifying them as activity of brains--a commonplace among clinical psychologists that had not percolated through disciplinary firewalls into anthropology. White put cultural evolution back on the theoretical agenda, suggesting that if it could be studied scientifically as well as historically, then its general processes (if not its specific events) might be predicted as well as reconstructed.

The greatest impediment to collaboration between Kroeber and White was White's crusade against the heritage of Franz Boas and the incumbents of the latter-day Boasian Ascendancy. With Boas only a few years dead, White accused him of having repressed the scientific development of American anthropology by a dictatorial, wrong-headed attitude toward evolution and the scientific method. In White's view, by sweeping evolution under the rug Boas had forced a generation of American anthropologists into a fruitless and apparently endless quest for mere facts. White became obstreperous during 1945, with "History, evolutionism, and functionalism: Three types of interpretation of culture," and "Diffusion versus evolution: An anti-evolutionist fallacy." In the former he added "evolutionism" to "history" and "science" as modes of study of the human career, claiming that although temporal aspects of the record yielded to history, its formal aspects yielded to science, and that the temporal-formal together were the proper subject matter of evolutionism. As chief among those White considered to have confounded history and evolution, Kroeber was a target of this exercise. In "An anti-evolutionist fallacy" White discounted diffusion, a mechanism for culture change that the Boasian program had long favored, and which Kroeber had elaborated five years earlier (Kroeber, 1940). The diffusion model explained little, in White's view, but camouflaged an overriding and unjustified Boasian assumption that everything was always in an ineffable process of change, and that the meaning of traits did not transfer and could not be traced from one culture to another. Like Harris (1968:275-77) after him, White assailed as a non-issue the dichotomy between history and science over which Kroeber and Boas had quarreled during the 1930s (Kroeber, 1935), claiming that they had befuddled themselves by mistakenly subsuming the evolutionary in the historical. Kroeber (1946, 1948) could only reply that White had subsumed the historical into the evolutionary.

White could be embarrassing as well as annoying. In the late 1940s he was only slowly shedding his (by then perilous) pre-war pro-Soviet political convictions. Morganian stages of historical development were a necessary Marxian component of his thought, and unlike Kroeber, he never disguised allegiances or shrank from confrontation. A letter Ralph Linton wrote to W.D. Strong contained a glimpse of White as his pre-war contemporaries knew him. With the capitalist world collapsing and the Soviet model seemingly ascendant, White visited the Soviet Union in 1930 and found a hero in Stalin. Linton, whose politics were resolutely right, was not sympathetic: "It will be amusing to see [White] among the conservatives [at the University of Michigan], for he is an out-and-out Bolshi since his Russian experience" (WDSP: RL/WS 11/29/30).

As a public fellow traveler White could not be to Kroeber's taste, but he had dared where Kroeber had not, and had produced what Kroeber, in a career of gingerly poking at the question of culture change, had not: a mechanism. In "Energy and the evolution of culture (1943/1949), bolstered by the influential writings of the archaeologist V.G. Childe (whom Kroeber greatly admired), he put forward the concept of energy capture and use as both mechanism and potential measure of technological progress. White explicitly denied that any but "culturological" (mostly technical-economic) factors were in play, dismissing out of hand race, instinct, intelligence, consciousness, the moral sense, personality, and individual minds (including geniuses). All these were unscientific. He thus offered a motive force for the Superorganic that operated right in front of the anthropologist's eyes, if means could be found to measure it.

In 1946, White reviewed somewhat positively Kroeber's Configurations of culture growth, a huge catalogue of culture-producing geniuses plotted in time and space. He sent a preview draft of what was more a feature-length article than a book review to Kroeber, explaining that such a lengthy book required lengthy treatment. Although distinguishing himself from Kroeber (who might have had some prior intellectual claim in "culturology"), he largely approved of a book many considered Kroeber's weakest. He felt that Kroeber had failed grandly, but in propping up a Superorganic view of Culture would have done better to treat it as a whole rather than teasing it into Boasian parts. Nonetheless, he admired Kroeber's ability to think outside the Boasian box. The review was: "...Not calculated to enhance my popularity in the AAA. But it is honest and sincere as it is plain spoken. I feel that anything else would be unworthy of both of us" (ALKP: LW/ALK, 1/10/49). Kroeber responded with a very long letter, acknowledging his compulsive trait counting for the only time I am aware of. He seemed circumspect, even fearful of this newly powerful junior colleague who was so forward with ideas he himself had kept under wraps. As also with Bidney, he wanted to establish a dialogue to pull White close, rather than thrust him away. The overall flavor was chatty, with forced charm and hollow-sounding claims to have largely accomplished what he had intended, and that he was not (much) disappointed. He referenced his concurrent correspondence with Bidney about causation, wrapped in compromise language that intoned, "we don't really disagree much, we are all in this together, and have a long way to go." On the prevailing mode of research into culture and personality, then in vogue, he found common ground:

I liked your review article. You've treated me in a most friendly spirit. ...I don't feel in the least I failed. First of all, I had a fine time satisfying an inner need. And then I think I sharpened or corrected a good many particular interpretations of fair breadth, and adumbrated some new ones, besides emphasizing an attitude. To have emerged with something bigger would have been grand, but there was no real disappointment....Entire agreement with your point that if we abandon culture for ink-blots etc., who will deal with it ?

On force and cause. I think here is where we all bog down by using words in different senses. I have used them differently at different times. Bidney's recent American Anthropologist article, though too technically logical, has value in making clear some of our implications. I think it must be admitted with him, and Boas, that the efficient causes of culture are men; but its formal causes are cultural; and that of the two, the efficient causes have little relevance or significance as against the formal ones – provided one is interested in culture. Of course, if interest is rather in men and how culture affects them, or they it, the formal causes matter less than the efficient; they can then be treated or assumed as if constant while men and their interactions vary – as in Configurations I have virtually held men constant while I watched how cultural forms changed.

There followed a sentence of cosmic reach and vaporous theological imagery, to argue that the search for ultimate origins and causes was pointless:

What you cite from me on p. 19, paragraph three as to our not understanding very much is probably connected with the ambiguity as to causality. Given certain cultures or cult[ural] forms to start with, I feel we can go quite a long way (in time or timelessly) in understanding a good deal about them by analyzing out their interrelations or “formal causes.” But sooner or later, as we go backward (or forward), we reach a point where this universe ends... where the formal-cause thought-process is no longer operative, and where we ultimately have to bring in the “first or productive causes of cult[ure]” which we still see so dimly. ...I think we know a lot about the nature of culture, but we do not really understand either its origin or its fundamental nature.

White still believed that Kroeber had confounded history and evolution, and Kroeber's response prefigured his rejoinder in Southwestern Journal of Anthropology several months later, except that he assigned White some homework. It didn't hurt to pull rank where languages were concerned:

The matter of history and evolution, (History *versus* Evolution, you say) I'd like awfully to talk over with you some time. I see only a difference of degree or emphasis, not of kind. Have you read Hugh Miller's History and Science of a few years ago? He is a philosopher at UCLA. Try it, and give me a reaction. He accepts history outright as evolution in the broad sense. The limitation of Rickert is in being under the ban of the German Geisteswissenschaft concept, which he partly freed himself of by converting Geist into Kultur, but then didn't know what to do with evolutionary biology and geology, and wavered between ignoring them and assigning them outright to science! There's a lot of basic methodology still to be clarified in this area.

White, whose use of energy was entirely materialistic, had criticized Kroeber on his almost vitalistic uses of “force” and “energy” in cultures and civilizations. Kroeber ducked this and glanced safely off environmental determinism. But he could not suppress a note of disappointment about the reception Configurations had received:

As to technology and energy, this too is something I would like to talk out with you. Subsistence and technology are primary, of course – as antecedents – but I'm not so sure they are as causes. As to energy, while I talk metaphorically of “cultural energy,” aren't you talking of physical energy controlled by cultures? [As to] Culture whole[s]: I'd rather have tackled it, but the pieces were good sized hunks to chew. In the next-to-last chapter on “Nations” I did try to deal with whole cultures, one after the other; and that

chapter probably satisfied me the best in the book. But as yet no one else has paid any attention to it. Your article has given me a lot of stimulation, as you see. I'd like to keep the copy, if you don't need it, and do some further thinking about the problems it raises, while it's in the press. (ALKP: ALK/LW 9/11/45)

These theoretical points about evolution and cultural wholes moved between them so easily because they shared the concept of the Superorganic. But they were dealing with more than theory - they were also adjusting their positions with regard to the man who was White's bête noir and who had loomed behind Kroeber since before the century dawned. When White suggested that Boas had lacked imagination, Kroeber's defense of his old teacher as a dutiful empiricist in fieldwork was half-hearted:

I agree that there is no substitute for creative imagination. The difference presumably is that the inductionist keeps coming back to his data, the deductionist leaves them as soon as possible. I would credit Boas with plenty of power of imagination, but also the obsession of only using it critically, that is negatively.

White had criticized Boas in ways that Kroeber may have wished to, and in a later exchange he touched on Kroeber's ambivalence regarding evolution:

I was very much interested in what you had to say about Boas and about such matters as greatness, achievement, and recognition in general. With regard to my 'feelings about Boas'; I do not believe that my feeling about him is any stronger than the feeling of dozens of his admirers - or, as you once said, of his disciples who 'literally worshipped him'. The only exceptional thing about my feeling is that it is negative rather than positive. Intense loyalty and admiration or even worship of Boas seems to be taken for granted[,] but a severely critical attitude ...seems to require some explanation. ...He has been regarded as perhaps the greatest anthropologist of all time and has been held up before the world as the very essence of the scientific spirit, ...whereas I am convinced ...that he was quite muddle-headed, incapable of creative imagination and philosophic synthesis, and ...directly opposed to the spirit and procedure of science. ...He has done American anthropology a great injury and ...it will take a long time [for it] to recover.... I would agree ...that my opposition to Boas does not rest upon evolutionism alone.... Boas and I are at opposite poles on almost all subjects. But I would not agree with you ... that I have been tolerant in 'letting you off' on this score. It is true that you have paid lip service to the anti-evolutionist point of view, as for example in the early pages of your Anthropology. But I cannot see that you have carried your anti-evolutionism beyond lip service. On the other hand, I believe that there is abundant evidence in many of your writings which indicate that you have thought and worked in the spirit of evolutionism....About our exchange [on 'History and evolution'],...two separate and distinct kinds of processes in culture can and should be distinguished. Whether we designate these ...'history' and 'evolution' ...or some other terms, does not matter..."(ALKP: LW/ALK, 2/27/47).

Evidently White knew what Kroeber had been doing right along, and wanted a truce, if not an alliance. For his part, Kroeber was almost ready to concede that the Boasian Ascendancy had stifled some crucial kinds of research. Apparently not much came of this near miss of minds, for their correspondence thereafter was infrequent and unexceptional. Twelve years later, however, at the Darwin Centennial panel on "social and cultural evolution," in which one of the "points for discussion" implied a similarity between "culture history" and "evolutionary sequence," Kroeber expressed mock surprise that he and White had been "sleeping in the same

bed for thirty years without knowing it” –only to have White insist (in Kroeber’s words) that it had in fact been “two beds” (cf. Stocking 2001:187-88)

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David Bidney (1967: 71-72, 329-30) later believed that Kroeber had, at his prodding, dropped the whole notion of general evolution of a Superorganic, and that White had picked it up. Bidney, American anthropology’s first philosopher and part of the chief theoretical thrust of post-war anthropology--the problem of the nature of culture--made himself Kroeber’s protégé. Configurations of culture growth attracted his attention, but his own critique of the Superorganic (1944) first put them in contact. Bidney, gradually wooed from an initial interest in Edward Sapir, was co-opted by generous attention even as he showed himself too well-versed in Kroeber’s work for Kroeber’s comfort. He seized his opportunity to get to the heart of American anthropology and conduct interviews through searching correspondence. Kroeber, apparently sensing that Bidney could do him either good or harm, allowed himself to be drawn out on theoretical and philosophical topics that he usually eschewed.

Bidney began aggressively, calling Kroeber’s Superorganic an idealist “culturalistic fallacy” (1944: 42). “Idealism” here meant the operational reality, even the mass, of non-material things. But the thrust of the whole phrase invoked the opposite of the reductionist “naturalistic fallacy” committed by those who saw environmental determinism as the paramount force in culture history, or explained culture with reference to the biological levels below. In Bidney’s view White had committed both errors. Kroeber, for whom Culture was sui generis and autonomous, he contrasted with Boas and Sapir, as “realists” who held culture to have no objective existence of its own, but rather to “exist” only in the minds of practitioners and in its semiotic transmission. For Bidney the Superorganic was a reification that took the Boasian notion of culture to a dizzy height, sacrificing the uniqueness of cultures to the autonomy of Culture. By not ruling out the possibility of degrees of Culture, it also undermined cultural relativism. He closed with a pious and somewhat pompous assertion that:

Culture, we maintain, is a historical creation of Man and depends for its continuity upon free, conscious transmission and invention. ...[and] neither natural forces nor cultural achievements taken separately or by themselves can serve to explain the emergence and evolution of cultural life.

Kroeber had claimed privately to be sick of talking about the Superorganic, and once wished aloud that he had never written about it (T. Kroeber 1970: 223-30). Drawing Bidney close through letters, a tactic he preferred with formidable critics, was the easier, safer course. Bidney came to admire Kroeber almost unreservedly, eventually saying that he “rivalled Boas” (1967:467), and praising his ethnographic efforts in California as the perfect grounding for theoretical contributions. Because Bidney’s view of Kroeber was in good part dictated by Kroeber, we may take it as nearly a case of Kroeber discussing himself.

Although there is mention of prior letters, the first to survive was by Kroeber (ALKP: ALK-DB 3/26/45). He opened diffidently, disavowing theoretical aspirations and claiming (implausibly) to be unread in philosophy and unfamiliar with Aristotelian causation, which Bidney believed key to an optimal explanation of culture. He also claimed (incredibly) not to know what Bidney meant by the term “emergent evolution”:

I am not used to being read with such care... I am really unread in formal philosophy: I had to look up Aristotle’s four kinds of causes and what Emergent Evolution meant. I wish

I did know more. I certainly want to be rigorously logical, even if anything methodological or philosophical I do has been essentially a by-product of concrete work. ...any slurs... were directed at social science activities like economic theory, or material-content philosophies like Spencer's and Comte's. If not, point out the passages and make me retract.... As I think I said in my last, I have no doubt overstated my case [i.e., regarding the Superorganic]. I grant that persona are invariably the efficient causes of cultural phenomena....In your terms, I would say that formal (and perhaps material) causes are more significant for understanding culture (not man) than the efficient causes. Is this an extreme position or an absurd one?...As to Emergent Evolution, thanks for the enlightenment. I'm without prejudice as to the label. As for idealism, I can see why you class my point of view with Marx's or Spengler's, but not with Hegel (whom I could never understand) nor with Plato (if I at all understand his doctrine of ideas). Not that I mind that name either.

Kroeber touted the empirical approach as the royal road to understanding, a customary piety undercut by the Superorganic. Technology was given its due as part of culture. He cleverly linked the first and last elements in the chain of "culture over minds over material substrate" to show culture ruling both minds (which were merely parts of societies) and matter. He wavered on the Superorganic, but was not talked out of it:

...A curious thing about levels is that culture at the top—being most epiphenomenological—effects not only minds but organisms and inorganic nature. Without culture, would human minds and bodies dam the Colorado and the Boulder? I can't quite figure out what kind of causation that is; but it seems that the specific precipitating factor must be TNT and steamshovels—artifacts, and therefore part of a cultural system.

The way to understand a superorganic entity was the (quite Boasian) empirical study of its manifestations:

I grant of course that "psychobiological references (or implications) are indispensable"—both to the immediately efficient media (persons) and to the psychosomatic organisms as a limiting framework or condition. (Incidentally, this was held by Terde [sic], Wundt, Tylor, and Boas before Sapir and Malinowski.) What I maintain boils down to this: to understand culture one has to understand the variety of its individuations, and for this, knowledge of related culture manifestations—related in time, space, origin, and type—is the first prerequisite. Undoubtedly this alone will not yield exhaustive final understanding; but without it, we shan't even begin to grapple with it. At least, such is the precipitate of my trying to grapple with it for 47 years.

A year and a half later Bidney had become rather dependent upon Kroeber's feedback, while Kroeber, still somewhat wary, was more in charge. In the wake of White's review of Kroeber's Configurations of culture growth Bidney's interest shifted to a fuller consideration of that massive work. He found Configurations flawed (like White he focused first on Kroeber's too-expansive use of the term "history" and his essentially bio-geographic approach to ordering culture history). Bidney was a nitpicker, and Kroeber, disappointed with the prevailing response to Configurations, was losing patience with philosophical vocabulary:

Your searching comment is good for the soul, but trying to one's complacency. Of course you are right that time and space are both essential for history. As usual, I overstated my case in trying to be emphatic, when I spoke of "timeless history." It really is history

with the time element held constant to a moment—highly “limited” as you say. I agree that the significance of such a moment is in its context of temporal continuity...

What Kroeber offered was the method of natural history applied to culture. If he could get Bidney to stop philosophizing and get down to evaluating fieldwork, they would be in the natural history of cultures business, with an emphasis on history, not mentalist blind alleys:

I understand that a cultural configuration per se (not in space-time) may be the object of an aesthetic analysis. But what do you mean by a “phenomenological analysis” which is non-historical but also alternative to “aesthetic”? Is it “science,” or what? What is its purpose...? I am ...much interested, because I suspect a lot of ethnological work may be just that. To me, personally, it becomes history, because as I read it or hear it I weave it into a space-time context, and therewith it acquires relational meaning also.... I’ve often wondered what Lowie gets out of reading ethnology: his historic sense is good, but his historic interest seems rather mild, compared with mine. Perhaps what he does with the material is just your “phenomenological analysis.” But what end does that serve?

...Of course there is a psychological process or activity (and physiological, too) in every cultural one. And I have always been interested in it. Much so, geographical environment cannot be left out. I wrote a volume on it—Cultural and Natural Areas. But only a Huntington thinks he can derive cultural qualities and events out of land and climate. So rebus symbolism has its psychological bases, syllabification as part of the resistance to abstracting phonemes ditto, acrophony ditto. But no psychology, of course, will explain how a symbol of an ox head came to stand for A and not B, or how the language happened to have an Aleph.

To shift Bidney’s attention away from the Superorganic Kroeber gave him credit for convincing him of some of the weaknesses of that concept, while acknowledging, perhaps enviously, that regarding meta-structures in history White had charged in where he had feared to tread. Ever a professor, he gave Bidney a little preemptive homework, asking him to list the points in his writings that Bidney thought weak (and might criticize later):

...As to psychologizing – aren’t you aware that you have caused me to modify my intransigent [sic] position of reification of culture? There again, my old stand was an overstatement. The specificities of culture will never be usefully, or specifically explained by psychology alone; nor from purely social phenomena; they must first of all be related to other cultural phenomena. That much I saw, and still hold to. Where I went too far was in stretching culture from a system of viewing... phenomena into a closed system of reality of its own. This I mean to take back publicly as soon as I get around to it. ...I grant that reification of the Superorganic involves immanent determinism. I think I’ve had inclinations that way, but also hesitations. I dipped my foot in, but kept pulling it out; White plunged in. I mean to keep my foot dry from now on, thanks to you. ...Now do something for me. As a philosopher, I’m an amateur and though rash am not wholly lacking in humility. As an anthropologist, I have professional self-respect. Has the tendency to reification invaded my construal of specific cultural situations to the point of vitiating them, so far as you know? If so, will you cite chapter and verse?

There was another half-concession, though one putting behavior in its place with all the data of sociology underneath and underlying emergent culture:

I'm ready to accept culture as an attribute of human behavior. Are you ready to concede that cultural phenomena have to be operated with on the cultural level before being resolved into psychology? (ALKP: ALK-DB 8/1/46)

"Attribute" may have implied epiphenomenal status, but Kroeber lost little in conceding this, for he had always thought Culture had evolved, but it had also leaped a Rubicon. If not exactly shifting his position, Kroeber was responding to Bidney's nudging, but White's pull was also in evidence. Kroeber didn't "get around" to renouncing the Superorganic until 1952, and when he did he retained culture as a realm of its own, though with more roots in the levels below. He may already have been leaning toward White, and back toward the Superorganic, and wanted Bidney to show his hand. He conceded the obvious, but demurred on its implication: culture ultimately came from people's heads, but just as phenotypes ultimately came from genes, the relation did not relegate genes to a lesser order of reality.

Bidney, uncharacteristically neglecting to read the fine print, was delighted with Kroeber's renunciation of the Superorganic as a separate "level of cultural reality" (Kroeber, 1952: 23). With that letter as evidence, he thereafter credited himself with having brought it about (1953/1967: 467-81). At the time, however, he tested Kroeber once more on it, from a more philosophical direction, and elicited another, even stronger renunciation of the Superorganic as a real thing in the world, though with the caveat that the sciences that addressed each of the many emergent levels of organization were, after all, studying something. And on the crucial matter of culture as the highest of the emergent levels in the natural world, Kroeber fired back with an interesting Kantian juxtaposition of phenomenality and reality (ALKP: ALK/DB 9/17/46)

As to levels. These seem to be generally accepted – but as to what? Granted they are not levels of reality, what are they levels of? Phenomena, perhaps. ...Or conceptual structures? Or perhaps another word is more fitting than "level." In short, is your description directed at levels as such, or at levels being construed as realities? If the latter, you needn't enlarge; I admit the point that culture is no more a thing than mind or life is. [At this point Kroeber crossed out an entire page and began again, only to write the same thing, verbatim] ...But if the former, I am thoroughly at sea. The hierarchy of sciences is a commonplace; and to each group of sciences there corresponds a fairly definable class of phenomena.

Bidney was not finished with the question of "timeless" history, a standard gambit for anyone taking issue with Kroeber's badly explained bio-geographical approach to culture history --which was a product of his early years, when the culture historical record was largely a blank and comparison of trait distribution in present-day cultures seemed a more reliable guide to the past. In linguistics as in ethnology the framework of interpretation was much the same as in bio-geographic triangulation on past states, whether one was discussing the possibility of Ural-Altai dialects scattered in Iberian mountains, the distribution of pottery styles, or the variety of beak forms among Galapagos finches. Bidney did not get along with White, but used his arguments to prod Kroeber. This time he prodded him far from the Boasian approach, and the path got crooked. Responding, Kroeber wrote:

...As to timeless history, ...I believe what I said in the White article about historic significances being dependent upon breadth (ultimately totality) of context, is evidence that timelessness is a special phase, or limit, of historical approach, not a categorically distinct species. When dating fails one, or there never was any, so that a stretch of events has to be handled as a block, we don't therefore throw that material away. We

extrapolate, with a degree of speculation; or infer (also somewhat speculative) time events from space distributions. One always aims as well at space and event...[words missing] definition of history. Holding either time or space fixed in a given piece of work doesn't make it unhistorical, I would say, as long as it relates to a larger context which includes time and space. Perhaps ...“timeless” is what you stick at. Would synchronic be more acceptable? In short, I do not define history non-temporally. It consists of characterizations of phenomena (“events”) in space and in time setting. The characterization (narration, description, physiognomy) is primary, because without it the space and time frames obviously are empty; whereas if either of them is lacking, there is always the chance of the deficiency being supplied later. ...Either the time or space element can be temporarily held fixed (synchronous instead of diachronic presentation), i.e. may be apparently suppressed, for special purposes, or for lack of data; though any such presentation resumes its full significance only on re-incorporation into the total time-space frame. This re-incorporation may be implicit while the work is being done; or subsequent, or ultimately potential.

The bio-geographical approach was born of necessity--a lack of data in time depth. Kroeber's pronouncements on it had been taken out of context. However, his attempt to affix blame for aspects of an approach that had characterized his work for decades on the need to answer Radcliffe-Brown and Leslie White was not convincing. His admiration for White remained quite grudging and clandestine:

The whole time-suppression business is an incident, a minor angle. It is a protest against White, Radcliffe-Brown and Co. trying to define the historical approach over-variously, ...as something of which time is the only essential or distinguishing factor--As if you could leave significance out of history! Read again how White imagines a history of the alphabet: a meaningless meandering of an atomic phenomenon through time and space... and this after I had written a story full of change and process and significance! And R-B's dictum that history is good when it operates with dated documents--unsound otherwise!

I evidently expressed myself unfortunately somewhere; and if you misunderstood, others may, and I'll take occasion to refine or correct my expression, if I can. But if you think that I consider history basically timeless, you're barking up the wrong tree. I agree with you, on all but the extreme farther edge. Tell me what you see “evolution” as being over and above the obviously historical part; or more about levels; or about P[henomenological] A[pproach]--in all of which I do not see as far as I'd like to--and I'll be grateful. But in this timelessness business you're tilting at some venial excess, or slip, or inaccuracy of mine, which is of no real importance. When you say that I'm also infected with Whittitis only I cover it up more, I haven't denied it: I've listened for more. But you've got to put it on different grounds than a marginal indiscretion (ALKP: ALK-DB 9/17/46)

Kroeber was straining at the Boasian leash on evolution, but not in Darwin's direction. A little over a decade later he would preside over a Darwinian Centennial Symposium on evolution, but in the late 1940s he had little to recommend him as a Darwinian, because he still mistook evolutionary patterns for evolutionary process:

As to ‘evolution’: I have always been pretty guarded as to accepting or defining it. So far as it is not history, or is more than history, I don't know what it is; and I said so in the paper on White.

Bidney's Theoretical Anthropology was shot through with Kroeber's influence and references to his work (Kroeber was the most cited author other than Bidney himself; White was third). The second edition (1967: 467-81) was even dedicated to Kroeber, and contained an extensive appendix on his contribution to contemporary anthropology. Even the Superorganic, which Bidney had assailed vigorously a decade before, was treated with restraint and given its due. In Bidney's mature view the Superorganic, however inflated it sometimes was, had been Kroeber's most fertile idea:

Kroeber is perhaps best known for his paper on "The Superorganic"....first introduced by Herbert Spencer, he reinterpreted and adapted it to the uses of ethnology [as] a superpsychic, autonomous level of phenomenal reality independent of the processes of biology and psychology. Later, he differentiated the cultural Superorganic from the level of society as well. His objective was to establish cultural anthropology as an autonomous science, and to preclude the reduction of cultural phenomena to those of a lower level of reality, such as psychology and biology. Individuals were regarded as the passive carriers of culture, and all cultural phenomena were to be explained historically and causally in terms of other cultural phenomena. Culture as a whole was viewed as a historical and evolutionary level of reality subject to its own laws. ...The majority of the anthropological profession ...in America at least, tended to accept [the Superorganic] and incorporate it in their textbooks.

We are entitled to question whether Kroeber's notion of the Superorganic was ever as popular as that with ethnologists, for almost all of them had reacted badly to it, as had Bidney, who could not resist a little third person lime-lighting:

As a matter of record, it was not till Kroeber's view was challenged by David Bidney in his article on "The concept of culture and some cultural fallacies"... that the former began to re-consider and modify his views in a series of papers. The revised edition of Kroeber's Anthropology testifies to this fundamental change, and the preface to the reprinted of the original version on "The Superorganic" in The nature of culture... frankly acknowledges the limitation of his paper.

Bidney, aware of Kroeber's ability to evade easy categorization, wanted to transfix him before helping him on toward apotheosis, but this still said much about the flexibility of a man many have characterized as never having changed his mind about much of anything. As if to compensate for the flexibility he had just implied, Bidney – who was still probably unaware of White's hold on Kroeber, grumbled about how difficult it had been to move him even a short distance:

In revising his views, Kroeber still adhered to the thesis that culture should be regarded for purely methodological or heuristic purposes 'as if' it were independent of individuals and minds, even though it is not actually so. Cultural achievements and products were to be studied impersonally, 'as if' they were independent of individuals and societies, in order to establish useful correlations, patterns, and configurations, but this did not mean, he insisted, that culture was an autonomous process, sui generis. This purely methodological reinterpretation of cultural phenomena enabled Kroeber to retain and validate his program of research of the culture element distribution in North America as well as his method of surveying the configurations of classical civilizations.

That rings true, and it is interesting that Bidney believed that such data-bound studies as Kroeber's on culture element distributions were grounded in the Superorganic. The idea has merit, for the "styles" Kroeber invoked and expounded throughout his later life were planks in a platform that supported the Superorganic, a concept that could be described, but never explained without invoking emergent evolution.

* * * *

These were very different men. Kroeber was ever inclined to compose quarrels rather than act them out. White was independent and pugnacious. Bidney, who was critical of White, appears to have been somewhat timid, at least at first, and in search of an intellectual patron. Kroeber noted on several occasions that Bidney was excessively nervous about publishing (ALKP: ALK-Aberle, 9/16/53; ALK-Fejos, 5/5/53), but he gained confidence with Kroeber's help. Kroeber was at the apex of this triangle, and both White and Bidney appear to have believed that he was more-or-less on their respective sides. Bidney criticized Kroeber's version of the Superorganic and prided himself on having pushed him into qualifying and then abandoning it. However, he later came to regard it as a fruitful, if flawed idea, Kroeber's "Copernican Revolution," and the first statement of "the doctrine of emergent evolution as applied to the history of human civilization" (1967: 36-37). For his part, Kroeber, however disingenuously, had once asked Bidney what emergent evolution was, and seems never to have wholly given up the Superorganic. Kroeber had something to hide, or at least to keep unmentioned. His thought orbited an unspoken evolutionary assumption, like a visible accretion disk around a black hole. Boas had caused his life-long skittishness about cultural evolution, but White among others saw that Kroeber was an evolutionist in the nineteenth century mode. For his part, Kroeber seems to have been wistful to see White's evolutionary model in the ascendant, and privately acknowledged the proximity of their worldviews. However, Kroeber evidently feared the flaring criticism of cultural evolution the Boasian Ascendancy could still fling at an eleventh-hour apostasy. Nor in honor could he abandon Boas so completely just his mentor's shade was being brought to bay.

This piece was extracted from a dissertation for the University of Chicago's Department of History: "ALK among the Archs: Alfred Louis Kroeber's impact within Americanist archaeology." UMI Dissertation Publishing has put it on line. I wish to thank the Bancroft Library at Univeristy of California, Berkeley and the National Anthropological Archives in Washington D.C. for permission to quote from the letters herein.

Abbreviations

AA: American Anthropologist
ALKP: A.L. Kroeber Papers, Bancroft Library, U.C. Berkeley
SWJA: Southwest Journal of Anthropology
WDSP: W. D. Strong Papers, National Anthropological Archives

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

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