

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ATTITUDE

BY A. L. KROEBER

THE important thing about anthropology is not the science but an attitude of mind. What this attitude is and how it came about is the subject of this review.

Modern anthropology was born in the decade beginning in 1850. It was then that Tylor made his first studies; and by 1881 he was able to assemble his life-work in a little volume, "Anthropology," which is still the book which is the widest in range and touches on most problems of any in the subject.

In the same mid-century Ratzel and Bastian began the work which has caused Germans ever since to look on them as the founders of the science. Ratzel dealt with environment, areas and distributions, diffusions and marginal persistences of culture; Bastian with "elementary ideas"—those manifestations, like the belief in sympathetic magic, or the femininity of the moon, that seem to recur in human history without reference to race or time or space. Essentially, anthropologists are still working along the same two lines: there is a sharper technique and much more specific information to operate with, but the fundamental logical approach is Ratzel's or Bastian's. Tylor, perhaps more than any one since him, was able to interpret both ways.

The French pioneers, in the same formative, determining years, threw their energy into two special subjects that called for precision and clean classification of concrete data: anatomical or racial anthropology and prehistoric archæology. In both fields they maintain, if not undisputed preëminence, then at least a lead of

cumulative record to this day. The anatomical school centered about Broca; the prehistoric was launched by an enthusiast, Boucher de Perthes, and established into success by an organizer, de Mortillet. Culture phenomena as such did not interest the French. Tarde, a great man, did social psychology; Comte, another, founded sociology.

In this first generation also were promulgated the theories that still circulate among the laity: that savages are uncontrolled and promiscuous and were once normally incestuous; that descent from the mother preceded that from the father; that there is a seriation from savagery through barbarism to civilization. Marx glumly ground such of this grist as came to his mill; and Spencer built his imposing edifice of principles from the top down. America promptly caught the fever: Morgan's hard, simple, pertinacious system made him an international influence; Brinton, often dogmatic in detail, was perhaps the student of broadest range after Tylor.

In the forty or fifty years that followed the founding generation, knowledge has grown enormously and has been gathered systematically; a critical attitude has been refined, until now a fairly rigorous method of investigation is at least recognized as necessary, and sometimes actually used, in place of the often simple and trustful approach of the pioneers. But the basic problems seem to be much the same—and as far from solution. Perhaps this is doing injustice to the anthropologists of to-day. But I am trying to see the situation as an outsider might see it who knew the relevant facts; and the danger for those

within is always to overestimate the near-at-hand with which they are in contact.

Two things have, however, increasingly emerged as time has gone on: the attitude of men working in the kindred sciences, and the attitude toward the concept of culture.

The other social sciences have now recognized anthropology as of their brotherhood. Sociology sees most anthropological material as its own. The New History proclaims that it will never be properly remade until it absorbs the whole range of anthropological data, those from primitive as well as those from civilized peoples. To be sure, the historians seem a bit chary of taking on this large programme in practice, and to date they have shown a strong inclination to stick to their good old last. But their theoretical open-mindedness is clear, and that is a great deal. Economics and politics have perhaps moved more conservatively, but they maintain at least a position of benevolent neutrality toward anthropology.

More important, because less channelled technically, is a widespread and growing attitude of detachment from the culture we are in; and with this detachment, the ability to conceive of culture as such. It sounds easy to attain this attitude; as a matter of fact, it is an unspontaneous and therefore difficult achievement, requiring launching by special circumstances, and then long and consistent control. The special circumstances are a series of developments in the civilization of the last few centuries, unparalleled, so far as we know, in the history of the world. The systematic control is what has brought a certain number of individuals in this civilization of ours to think and act anthropologically.

The important thing is not that the science of anthropology is spreading a gospel. The reverse holds: it is because our culture happens to have finally reached the abnormal—and possibly pathological—point where it is beginning to be culturally introspective, and can lay itself on the

dissecting table alongside a foreign or dead culture,—it is for this reason that anthropology exists. The science is the organized, codified symptom of a trend of the period. The trend, shared in by hundreds of thousands, is like a national sentiment; the few hundred anthropologists are the body of experts professionally engaged in applying the sentiment to new situations—with all the limitations of such a body.

II

The business of putting across what detachment from culture really implies is not an easy one. The individual who happens to be detached already needs no explanation. Those who are not do not feel this detachment, and words about it tend to glance off unperceived. In most deeper relations, we are all unconscious of the hold which our culture has on us. It is from our culture that we derive our standards; it is our culture that incessantly shapes our behavior, to the extent of determining the form of expression of all impulses—conditioning all responses, as we say nowadays.

A partial illustration may help. Illiterate people know nothing of grammar; but they invariably speak consistently to some grammatical scheme. Popular usage is misleading here. When we ordinarily refer to "ungrammatical speech," we mean speech which does not follow the code of rules standardized and accepted as correct. We do not mean that people who say "them guys" and "I ain't saw him" follow no rules at all. At least we have no reason to mean it: they plainly follow rules of their own. Just so, all known languages possess a grammar; those of tribes without writing are often exceedingly intricate in structure, though none of the speakers are any more aware of the fact than of their having a cortex with nine billion cells inside their heads. A good nervous system functions without knowing its existence, and a good language functions equally well whether its

rules—its structure and processes—have or have not been formulated.

In short, grammar—as a fact—is always there; grammarians may or may not come along to record it. Mostly, in the history of the world, they have not. When they have, they have always found something astonishingly determinative of how people will say what they have to say. The impulse to express this or that has nothing to do with linguistics. But how we say it, and therefore literally what we say—the actual objective phenomena of utterance—depend directly and immediately on linguistic factors—rules of grammar and the like.

Now, the same is true of culture to nearly the same degree. The naïve person in any culture accepts his culture without analysis. He feels it as part of himself, something that is in him. Those phases of a culture which concern him he appropriates for his functioning, makes his own; the others he ignores. Result: he scarcely knows that the culture exists except through his personal utilization of it. Whoever departs from the standards and norms which he has appropriated arouses disapproval of much the same kind as he who murders his mother tongue. The naïve person is interested, perhaps excited, about such deviations; but it is the deviations, not the standards, that arouse his attention. The standards are taken for granted; they are felt with immediacy.

So far we are still within the limits of one culture. When human beings of a different culture are encountered, they and their ways and the standards obviously inherent in their ways tend to be observed, first with wonder, then with amusement, in the end usually with irritation or contempt. But the naïve man, who is the “normal” man, is thereby no nearer an intellectual detachment from his own culture. He may be more tolerant for knowing strange customs and standards; he is not likely to be appreciably more introspective or analytical.

To revert to our parallel, grammar no

doubt existed in human speech for several tens of thousands of years without being dreamed of; grammar as a conscious dissection of one’s own speech—Greek or Sanskrit—is barely two thousand years old; comparative philology is but a hundred and fifty. And comparative philology is still mainly Indo-Germanic—the study of the sisters and cousins of our own idiom. True comparative linguistics,—depersonalized, denationalized, de-occidentalized,—the unpartisan examination of any and all languages with an interest in the total range and variability of their forms and processes, is yet in its infancy.

And so is depersonalized, denationalized, de-occidentalized culture investigation. History as *de facto* studied, written, and read is, Robinson’s and Spengler’s philippics notwithstanding, ninety-nine per cent the history of the culture movement of which our Western culture of the century is a mere variant. Economics virtually begins its operations with the French Revolution, mostly, in fact, not until about 1830. This is not a stricture. It is natural to be interested in oneself and one’s own; possibly it is healthiest; certainly it is practical. Only it does not make for really understanding oneself.

III

Now, what is this culture about which it is so hard or unnatural to be self-conscious? It is the product of men as they live in groups or societies. It exists only by virtue of men existing; but it exists as something over and above them. Flaherty, Greenbaum, and Patucci are individuals and remain such; but Flaherty, Greenbaum and Patucci as directors of the Enterprise Development Company, Inc., have given rise to something super-individual, and their acts as the association have a cogency and produce results which are legally, economically, emotionally tangible. This is not a far-fetched parallel except at one point. The incorporators deliberately take a step, certain of the conditions of which

are precisely regulated; and they take it for specific purposes. Whereas you, reader, and I, writer, along with Flaherty, Greenbaum, Patucci, and all others, are constantly and involuntarily, with and without legal sanction, sometimes with but mostly without awareness, producing culture: fortifying, hardening, altering, innovating this or that "way" of our time and civilization.

Culture has been defined as a detritus of living: a precipitate to which all generations contribute. It is that and more. Each generation is reared and lives in the precipitate of its forerunners. Unknowingly and inevitably it adapts itself to the environment of this social precipitate as it adapts itself to the environment of its climate. And by adding its quota of further precipitate, it starts its successor off in a somewhat different cultural environment. Law, religion, manners, tastes are never quite the same. Even in an ultra-conservative period in which they did not change formally—to take an unattainable example—they would acquire added age and therewith weight to steady or oppress the next generation.

Culture then, while it exists only through men or in men, has an existence of its own. It has not got a sensory reality in the sense that blood in the veins or salt water in the ocean has; but it exists, just as truly as, say, tuberculosis, or credit, or momentum. What is more, culture produces, through the men whom it affects, more or new culture; and is therefore a cause as well as an effect, a stimulus as well as a residuum. It is for this reason that the words *detritus* and *precipitate* are not wholly satisfactory as descriptions of it. They convey too much the idea of a mere by-product, whereas culture is creative as well as created. Spencer coined a happy word for it in *superorganic*; only, having neatly illustrated what he meant thereby, he put the concept back on the shelf and proceeded to explain sociological phenomena mainly by organic or pseudo-organic mechanisms.

One more analogy. We can conceive culture as like a coral reef—dead matter, the mere secretions of past generations, but none the less actual. What is more, the reef determines the life of the polyps on it. They can survive only within a narrow fringe of its oceanward crest. As they live and grow, the reef alters and presents new living surfaces, new possibilities, to their descendants. The reef is wholly the product of polyps; but it also determines the conditions and manner of existence of all individual polyps. Culture is just as actual and just as determining as the reef. And it is just as distinct from human beings as the reef is distinct from the living polyps on its upper edge.

A polyp who conceived the idea that he was a free, self-determining being, able to do what he pleased and to contribute as he liked to the growth of his "civilization"—the reef—would impress us as a somewhat shortsighted and egocentric polyp. If he despised the reef as "dead," well, that would be his privilege while alive, but it would not argue for his perspective of vision nor indicate that he understood the relations of things in the world or his relation to them.

From the point of view of what is organic, there are only men and polyps; culture and the reef are mere environment. But from an angle other than the organic—call it *superorganic* or anything else—the precipitate is not only a far bigger thing than the aggregation of all the individuals of one time, but has a history of its own, an immensely long history; and it necessarily influences the basic fortunes, the actual life histories, of all the individuals of any generation.

Once such an idea of culture has been conceived, one becomes a humbler personality. Thinking oneself god, or even potential god, in relation to humanity, comes to seem an infantility. It is not that the results of biology and psychology are minimized by the concept of culture. They retain full significance, but an understanding is superadded which these approaches

alone cannot yield. The grandeur, the pervasive influence of this superorganic precipitate, the fact that it can be perceived from one aspect as essentially self-sufficient, as almost self-determining, cannot but react on thought and ultimately on living. One begins to see what history is—the record of a set of processes or forces that shape humankind.

One realizes, too, how right those are who wish to reform history; how temperate in fact. The history that has come down to us and passes current is that of the western half of a continental annex plus little corners of two adjacent continents. It goes back barely twenty-five hundred years. Half of it is political—all the other aspects of culture crowded into the other and perhaps lesser half—because the approach is primarily through political documents. And what it contains of culture is almost inextricably mixed with biographies of personalities, sometimes with ethical or social or national propaganda.

IV

The problem follows how the inquiring attitude as to culture came about. This is a matter that is far from clear. The main point which emerges with sureness is that it is an unusual happening for a culture to be interested in culture as such. The ancients lacked the interest altogether. Herodotus can be called the first ethnologist as well as the father of history—but with the same half appropriateness only. He was interested in customs, the stranger the better. But it was the marveling of a child at an elephant, or at the story of a dragon; it was not an attempt to understand. Herodotus was fascinated by the endless panorama of ethnic custom and variety, as he was by the kaleidoscope of historic event; but he scarcely attempted to interpret. He liked, naïvely and with freshness, to deal with the raw materials of culture. He lived too early to found a science of culture. And the other ancients lacked even his spontaneous interest:

Greek culture was a pretty well self-absorbed affair.

Lucretius, carrying on one of the traditions of Greek philosophy, speculated a little as to the origins of fire, tools, worship, belief in gods, the state. He did not recognize culture as such. Arts and institutions were something that flowed of themselves, or by accident, from the original nature of man—from his fingers and claws, his naked skin, his greed and his fear, his dreams. The sense of problem rests lightly on Lucretius as on every good system builder.

The Middle Ages were too ignorant and provincial to be concerned; the Renaissance too creative and too taken up with its expansion of its cosmos. The Seventeenth Century became conscious of science; the Eighteenth began to see an opportunity in savage and strange nations. They were a tool with which to pry into our own culture, a club with which to beat it. There was a sudden interest in China for the comparisons it afforded. Voltaire brought Turks and Hurons on the scene as well as Sirians; and Rousseau his unspoiled savage. Then followed the romantic savage. But these ethnic aliens were dragged into view for reference back to our culture, not from an interest in problems concerned with their own. Voltaire fundamentally cared no more about Hurons than Tacitus about Germans. But Hurons and Germans were effective weapons with which to attack the society and manners of France and Rome.

The Nineteenth Century, accordingly, in which scientific interest in culture as such had its birth, found itself fairly well stocked with knowledge of all sorts of cultures, and much untutored, emotionally tinged interest in them lying about. It is not clear precisely what caused the century to try to deal scientifically with these cultures and thereupon with culture as such. In part it may have been an automatic extension of the procedure of science, then entering into its period of triumph. Another factor may have been a backwash

from the rising tide of nationalism. The fading of religious values almost certainly contributed, at least by removing obstacles; for religions that are believed or even habitually professed necessarily set up values of superiority which block impartial comparative inquiry. But as specific causes these explanations seem inadequate. The phenomenon is perhaps too near us, too much still part of us, for satisfactory analysis to be possible.

The anthropologists that have been the most formally accredited representatives of the movement to inquire into culture have been a curious lot, with strangely heterogeneous motivations. There were essential collectors, to whom the assemblage of varied data was fascinating. There were lovers of the exotic; there were mystics. Bastian was something of each; it would not be unfair to say that Sir James Frazer has inclinations in the same three directions. Anthropologists are still broken up into schools that have little in common except subject matter. There are the functionalists like Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski, essentially reverting to the old basis of reducing culture phenomena to the original nature of man. The historical reconstructionists have broken with psychology and trace the plan of what happened; some, like Nordenskiöld and Wissler, with cautious induction; others, such as Elliot Smith and Father Schmidt, with a running start of hypothesis. The historical realists, such as Laufer, are equally broad in their interests, but scarcely venture beyond the documentation that is available. Still others, Boas for instance, distrust both the psychological and the reconstructing historical methods and aim at isolating processes of cultural events with little interest in the place of these events in actual time and space. This school stands nearest to the exact sciences.

However, only a fraction of the study given to culture is in the hands of anthropologists. H. G. Wells and Oswald Spengler, who know better than to claim

the title, are fired by an intense interest to understand culture, and have contributed insight and perspective. Some of the most valuable work has come from special interests: Taylor on the alphabet, Fergusson on architecture, for example. And many an archæologist who has never formulated a general concept about what culture is or how it may behave has contributed valuably, and often more sanely than many an anthropologist. The avowed anthropologist, by and large, tends to be queer; as the psychologist inclines to be inhibited, the biologist fanatical, the physicist naïve.

One of the great nationalities of the West has stood nearly aloof from the current of interest in culture as such: France. In concrete archæology, as in history, which can be successfully pursued without many implications, the French easily hold their own; in ethnology, descriptive or interpretative, they hang back. Apparently they are too interested in their own culture to care much about understanding others.

V

Darwinism is often spoken of as allied to anthropological thought. There is no specific connection. The one deals with biological phenomena and processes; the other begins where these leave off. The common element is the wholly generic concept of evolution, equally applicable in astronomy and geology. Organic evolution is essentially modificatory, cultural evolution cumulative. The one is bound up with heredity, the other in principle is free from it. The similarity is merely a loose analogy, and the Darwinian point of view has retarded and confused the understanding of culture.

Sociology has followed neighboring paths; but they have been paths of its own, which are only beginning to connect. To begin with, sociology, as its name implies, has been concerned primarily with society, not with culture. Secondly, sociology be-

gan with the idea that there was a progress in values, and that itself stood as the pinnacle of the sciences. The tinging with values has persisted. Much of sociology is still concerned with reform and amelioration. Its aim is to serve. It remains an applied science without essential foundation in a specific pure science. These statements do not apply to all sociologists. There is a visible breaking away from the habits of applying value standards and bettering conditions. Given time, sociology even promises to outlive the effects of its siring by a propagandist philosopher. When it becomes a pure science it ought to be the cardinal one of all those concerned with culture.

I have spoken of the anthropological attitude in default of a better term. In the development of this attitude, recognized anthropology plays a part. All in all it is a small part; that of a vehicle in a procession, more or less. One cannot possess the feel of culture without realizing that anything organized, professionalized, is only an instrument or expression of the real currents that move underneath. What is significant is an attitude of mind. This attitude anthropologists perhaps do most to sharpen.

But the energy and potentiality of the attitude are widespread—diffused through and rooted in the whole culture of the present day.

CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

American Literature and the British Sniper.—As one who respects and admires the English and who hopes that the inevitable war between the two nations may be deferred as long as possible, I respectfully suggest to the gentlemen in Downing Street that they do their share toward averting the impending calamity by having a heart-to-heart talk as soon as possible with the English *littérateurs* and critics, both *in* and *ex urbe*. One of the best ways to provoke an unfriendly spirit between nations is, obviously, to provoke the writers of one of them, and England is presently irritating the American corps to an excessive degree. Gradually, out of this irritation, there is developing an anti-British feeling and, unless something is done about it quickly, it will not be long before nine-tenths of our pen-pushers will have combined themselves into a propaganda engine that will bode ill for international amity. When all things are said and done, it is the literary, critical and journalistic press of a country, even above the machinations of politicians—for the latter can do little without the assistance of type and ink—that colors its country's prejudices the one way or the other. And if a single "Uncle Tom's Cabin" could set a nation at war with itself, it is not hard to reason that a thousand books with a thousand convincing indignations toward some other nation might generate a war with the outsider.

What I write here will be taken by many laymen for exaggeration, but the fact remains, as they may determine for themselves by asking the first writer they meet, that the arbitrary snootiness, condescension and downright animosity of England

and the English to almost all American literary endeavor, however worthy, have long since not only disgusted American writers but are gradually converting that disgust into a concrete chip on the shoulder. Hardly an American book, of whatever sort, can be published in England without calling forth in English newspapers and periodicals a violent nose-fingering and derision. Even the best American writers are waved aside as mere literary bounders or are denounced with a superior and offensive air as provincial amateurs. Nor is the animosity kept at home. English writers, coming over here to make a little money serving as so-called guest critics for the literary reviews and newspapers, bring with them the same inimical, sniffish attitude and spread themselves in ridicule of American effort. And the visiting English lecturers, with so few exceptions that they are barely noticeable, follow suit.

While I have no personal ax to grind, since my own books have generally received very fair treatment at the hands of the English and since I am, as a consequence, of a perfectly open mind in the matter, I can't help seeing clearly the way the wind is blowing. Nor am I alone, for there are English writers and critics, forthright and honest men, who see it just as clearly. Hugh Walpole, St. John Ervine and J. B. Priestley are among these and are doing what they can, against heavy odds, to give Americans a fair deal, pounding them on the head when they deserve it but surely not arbitrarily kicking them in the pantaloons when they do not. Yet such Englishmen are having a tough time of it, for on all sides of them are writers and critics like Arnold Bennett, Chesterton