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Alexander A. Goldenweiser

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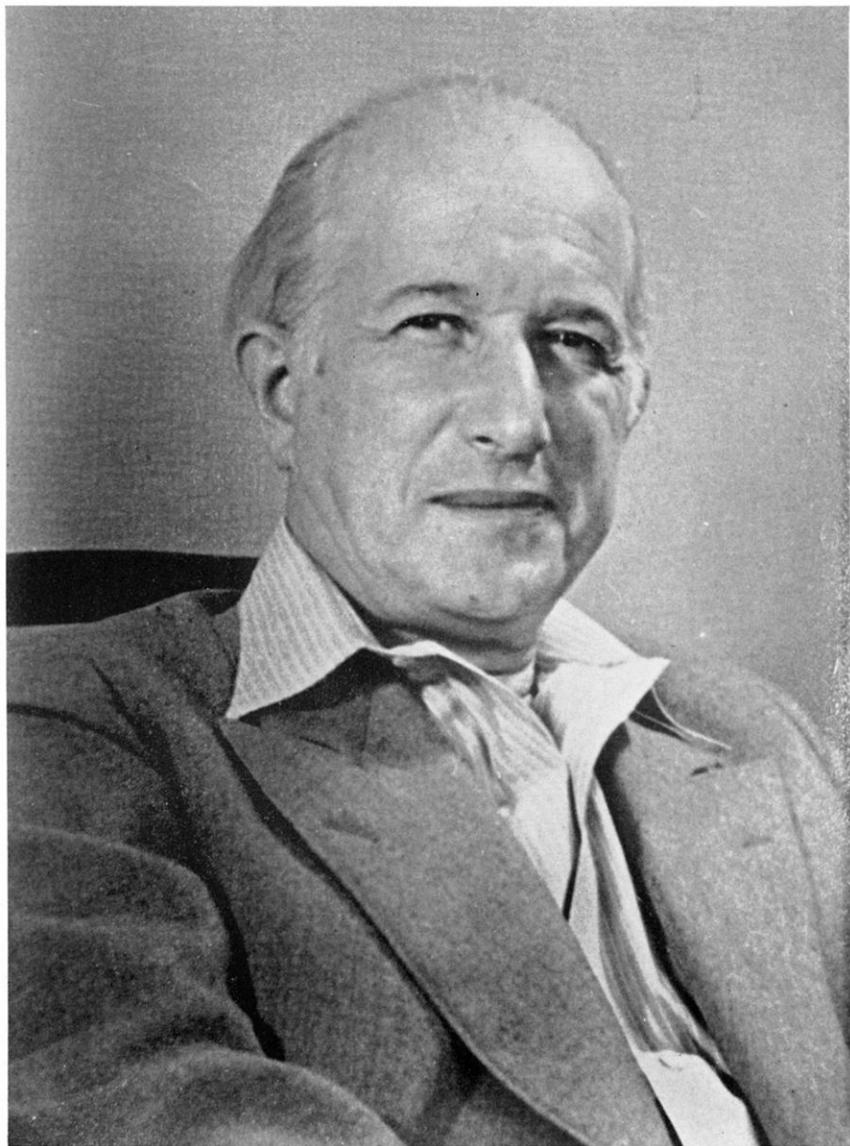
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THE death, on July 6, 1940, of Alexander A. Goldenweiser, deprives anthropology of an important and picturesque figure.

By nature and nurture he was cosmopolitan, citizen of a world of letters and scholarship that encompassed many fields and extended far beyond the bounds of his specialty. He was a gifted speaker and writer and has been described as "the most philosophical of American anthropologists." He was the only contemporary American to receive notice in Haddon's *History of Anthropology*. He was born, in 1880, in Kiev, Russia, where he had the social and intellectual companionship of a father who was an important European of his day in promoting Jewish cultural welfare. (The son wrote the biographical article on his father for the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*.) He traveled widely in Europe and, with his father, in this country. During 1900–1901 he was a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. Subsequently he studied at Columbia University, took the Ph.D. degree under Professor Boas in 1910, and from 1910 to 1919 was instructor in that institution in anthropology. His special interests were in social and cultural anthropology and theory. He was a lecturer in the Rand School of Social Science, 1915–1929, and in the New School for Social Research, 1919–1926; on the editorial board of the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* 1927–1928; Professor of Thought and Culture in the Extension Division, Portland Branch, of the University of Oregon from 1930 until his death; during 1933–1939 Lecturer in Reed College; and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, 1937–1938. His field work consisted of a study of the social and political organization of the Northern Iroquois, a brief report of which was published by the Canadian Government. His more important contributions fall within the period of a dozen years, from the appearance of his *Totemism: An Analytical Study*, in 1910, to the publication of *Early Civilization* in 1922. He published subsequently three books: *Robots or Gods* (1931), a literary venture; *History, Psychology, and Culture* (1932), a collection of papers previously published; and *Anthropology* (1937), a new edition of *Early Civilization*. It is difficult, not to say supererogatory, to assess the contributions of a contemporary and colleague; for always in these matters there is in the profession a wide range of opinion, which time alone will narrow. The present writer believes history will accord Goldenweiser an important place in the making and exposition of American anthropology.

He brought to his work broader interests and deeper insights than are



ALEXANDER A. GOLDENWEISER

commonly fostered by sheer ethnography, and he stimulated many colleagues and students. He was a humanist and insisted, by implication, that anthropology should not dehumanize its data. He saw tribal man in a framework of tribal cultures and also in a culture framework which embraced the world. Primitive men interested him as men, and not merely as Eskimo, Haida, or Arunta. He assessed their behavior as men who live in a particular culture—and always men, living, thinking, feeling. His first long study was *Totemism*, based on his Ph.D. thesis; and I think he regarded it as his most important contribution. In this investigation his fundamental interest was not in the problem, or in the specific results of his analysis, but in the method of investigation. Almost any topic in social life would have suited him and his purpose equally well. He proposed to show the shortcomings of the comparative method in the failure of its users to take into account the peculiar backgrounds of the respective regions whence they drew their examples, and the false equating of totemism in, for example, the Northwest Coast area of North America and Central Australia. He analyzed each area to ascertain the character of its totemism, and then sought the common element in totemism, which seemed to resolve into a specific psychological attitude. His findings, by implication, are based on empirical procedure. The principles and presuppositions underlying his methodology, on which its validity rests, did not disturb him; in fact he did not confess awareness of them. Yet such empirical procedure presupposes previous knowledge of the essentials of totemism; one must be able to select the relevant data; otherwise one is likely to include the nontotemic, for example, canoes, exogamy, or inheritance. One who does not recognize totemism when he sees it will not discover its character by studying something else. Methodologically, then, Goldenweiser, at the conclusion of his study, merely eloquently pulls out of the hat what he unobtrusively put into it at the beginning. If he had not put totemism into his data when he selected them, he could not have extracted it at the end—unless he mystically manufactured it during the process of analysis. He could, of course, by this method carefully analyze the respective phenomena and show wherein they differed and wherein they were alike, which, actually, was Frazer's problem. It remains doubtful to this day whether Goldenweiser's study sheds more light on the essential phenomena of totemism than does Frazer's study which appeared the same year, or Durkheim's, or Van Gennep's. The perplexing fact persists that in ethnography one can understand all of the phenomena—if at all—only by a consideration of all of the phenomena, and not by an analysis of merely a portion of them.

Goldenweiser's keen insight into fundamental problems of culture an-

anticipated the conclusions of many of his colleagues. Some culture conditions, he indicated, were favorable to diffusion of traits, and some were unfavorable. He pointed out that diffusion was not a mere mechanical spread of traits, as though governed by physical laws. Perhaps his most acute observation was with regard to the convergence that may be expected by reason of the limited possibilities in culture, account being taken of similarities in the respective bases. Inasmuch as anthropologists, like everyone else, are culturally conditioned and subject to their own compulsives—which fact, like every one else in similar circumstances, they would deny—this concept was little utilized.

Goldenweiser showed that the possibilities of culture development and expression are limited, and that limited possibilities make similarities inevitable. If, for example, a sufficiently large number of dice with limited kinds of surfaces are shaken out of a box, resemblances will appear. This is an inevitable result of the limited number of kinds of surfaces. So with culture. If the culture develops and the means of procedure are limited, there will be similarities between some phases of the respective cultures; and the degrees of similarity will depend upon the number and range of the cultures. . . . In material cultures, . . . as Goldenweiser has shown, similarities may be anticipated in paddle blades, pottery, baskets, stone implements. A stone implement is natural, crudely shaped, well chipped, polished, or pecked. The possibilities of form are limited by the nature of the material and the techniques. Similar limitations in the respective environments increase the probability of similarities in things dependent upon environment. The means of transportation used in deserts resemble one another more than they resemble those used in lake districts or in mountain regions, the similarity being due to the similar limitations imposed by the respective environments. This principle, however, must be modified to the extent that the technological development of the cultures differs. Again, the wide distribution of contagious and of homeopathic magic is not attributable entirely to diffusion. The specific forms of the law of association of ideas varies with culture and previous education, but, even so, ideas associated in time or in place or based on resemblance leave similar implications, though their specific garb may be distinctive of the culture. Civilized people no less than savages respond to their suggestions.¹

In the latter years of his life Goldenweiser gave much attention to cultural movements in Western European civilization. Indeed throughout his

¹ Wilson D. Wallis, *Culture and Progress* (New York, McGraw-Hill 1930), pp. 151–154. Goldenweiser's paper, *The Principle of Limited Possibilities*, was published in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in 1913. Plutarch, in his life of Sertorius, makes precisely this point: "If . . . events are limited to the combinations of some finite number, then of necessity the same must often recur, and in the same sequence. . . . It is no great wonder if in long process of time, while fortune takes her course hither and thither, numerous coincidences should spontaneously occur."

academic career his tastes were catholic. He was early interested in Freudian psychology and in its various developments or inspirations, notably introversion and extraversion. His abiding interest was social theory. Recently he confided that he was so much interested in social theory that he derived a satisfaction from reading any of it, however ill it might be. His literary gifts are manifest in his articles and books. Few native-born professionals used the English language as aptly and skillfully. An example of this achievement is the article which he published in the *Journal of Social Philosophy* in 1938. His talks to children on anthropological topics, some of which have been published, show unusual skill of exposition. He was a popular speaker, and easily established *rapport* with his audience. His many friends and acquaintances recall delightful conversations with him, an art in which he excelled; and all who knew him found him stimulating, entertaining, and a genial companion. His humanity, learning, and literary accomplishments helped to humanize anthropology and familiarize others with its problems and its conclusions.

The following (incomplete) list of publications not mentioned above probably represents Goldenweiser's most important contributions:²

Books (Contributor)

- "Hanging Flower, The Iroquois," in *American Indian Life*, Elsie Clews Parsons (ed.) pp. 99-106. (1922)
- "Anthropological Theories of Political Origins," in *Political Theories: Recent Times*, Barnes and Merriam (eds.), Dunning Memorial Volume (1924)
- "Cultural Anthropology," in *History and Prospects of the Social Sciences*, Barnes (ed.) pp. 210-254 (1925)
- "Immigration and National Life," in *Population Problems*, L. I. Dublin (ed.), pp. 195-209. (1926)
- "Diffusionism," in *Culture, the Diffusion Controversy*, with G. Elliot Smith, Malinowski, Spinden, pp. 99-106. (1927)
- "Anthropology and Psychology," in *The Social Sciences and Their Interrelations*, W. F. Ogburn and A. Goldenweiser (eds.) pp. 69-88. (1927)
- "Sex and Primitive Society," in *Sex in Civilization*, V. F. Calverton and S. D. Schmalhausen (eds.), pp. 53-66. (1929)
- "Man and Woman as Creators," in *Our Changing Morality*, Freda Kirchwey (ed.). (1930)
- "Totemism: An Essay on Religion and Society," in *The Making of Man*, V. F. Calverton (ed.), pp. 363-393. (1931)
- "Loose Ends of Theory on the Individual, Pattern and Involution in Primitive Society," in *Kroeber Anniversary Volume*, pp. 99-103. (1936)

² I am indebted to Mr. Alexius Goldenweiser, brother of Alexander Goldenweiser, for assistance in compiling this bibliography.

“The Contribution of Anthropology to Social Theory,” “The Relation of the Natural Sciences to the Social Sciences as viewed by Dilthey, Rickert and others,” in *The Contribution of Psychoanalysis to the Interpretation of Social Facts*; Barnes and Becker (eds.). In press.

“Social Education,” in *Social Education*, Grayson N. Kefauver (ed.)

Books (Editor)

Crofts Anthropological Series, Vol. I; *Religion in Primitive Society*, by Wilson D. Wallis, Crofts, 1939.

Books (Co-Editor)

With W. F. Ogburn, *The Social Sciences and Their Interrelations*, 1927.

Articles

1910 *Totemism, an Analytical Study* (JAFL, 23) 179–293

1911 *Exogamy and Totemism Defined; A Rejoinder* (AA, 13) 596–597

1912 *Death of Chief John A. Gibson* (AA, 14) 292–293

Andrew Lang on Method in the Study of Totemism (AA, 14) 382–391

Origin of Totemism (AA, 14) pp. 600–607

Folk-Psychology (Psychological Bulletin, 9) 373–380

1913 *Remarks on the Social Organization of the Crow Indians* (AA, 15) 281–294

The Principle of Limited Possibilities in the Development of Culture (JAFL, 26) 261–290

1914 *The Social Organizations of the Indians of North America* (JAFL, 27) 411–436

(Reprinted in *Anthropology in North America*)

Mother-in-law Taboo, (AA, 16) 139–140

1914–1919 *Animism, Magic Totemism* (New International Encyclopaedia 2nd ed.)

1915 *Heuristic Value of Traditional Records* (AA, 17) 763–764

Knowledge of Primitive Man (AA, 17) 240–244

Spirit, Mana, and the Religious Thrill (Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Method, 12) 632–640

1915–1916 *The Method of Investigating Totemism* (Anthropos, 10–11) 256–265

1916 *Sociological Terminology in Ethnology* (AA, 18) 348–357

Reconstruction from Survivals in West Australia (AA, 18) 466–478

1916 *Diffusion vs. Independent Origin, A Rejoinder to Prof. G. Elliot Smith* (Science, 44) 531–533

Use Inheritance and Civilization (AA, 18) 292–294

1917 *Autonomy of the Social* (AA, 19) 447–449

1918 *Form and Content in Totemism* (AA, 20) 280–295

Diffusion of Clans in North America (AA, 20) 118–120

History, Psychology and Culture; A Set of Categories for an Introduction to Social Science (Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Method, 15) 561–571, 587–607

1920 *New Approach to History* (AA, 22) 26–47

- 1921 *Four Phases of Anthropological Thought: An Outline* (Publications of the American Sociological Society, 16) 50-69
- 1923 *Race and Culture in the Modern World (An Address)* 24 pp.
- 1924 *Are the Races Potentially Equal?* (Proceedings American Philosophical Society)
Discussion of Professor Allport's Paper (Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology, 19) 74-76
- 1925 *Diffusion and the American School of Historical Ethnology* (American Journal of Sociology, 31) 19-38
- 1930-1934 *Bastian, A., Evolution, Social, Goldenweiser, Alexander Solomonovich, Huxley, T. A., Rivers, W. H. R., Totemism*, (Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences
- 1935 *Why I am not a Marxist* (Modern Monthly, 9) 71-76
- 1936 *The Nature and Tasks of the Social Sciences* (Journal of Social Philosophy, 2) 5-35
- 1938 *The Concept of Causality in the Physical and Social Sciences* (American Sociological Review, 3) 624-636

Critiques

- Radin, Paul, *The Method and Theory of Ethnology* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1933) pp. 50-60, 135-142, 183
- Sapir, Edward, Review of *Totemism, An Analytical Study* (Psychological Bulletin, 9 1912) pp. 454-461
- Shelden, W. H., *Dr. Goldenweiser and Historical Indeterminism* (Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Method, 16, 1919) pp. 327-330
- Wallis, Wilson D., *Culture and Progress* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1930) pp. 151-154

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