

Africa and the Americas: Life and Work of Melville Herskovits

Jerry Gershenhorn

North Carolina Central University

2017

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Gershenhorn, Jerry, 2017. "Africa and the Americas: Life and Work of Melville Herskovits", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : article1092.html

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site (www.berose.fr) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 1 June 2023 at 20:11

Melville Jean Herskovits, American anthropologist, was among the founders of African anthropology and African studies in the United States. From the 1920s to the 1960s, Herskovits confronted questions about race and culture in innovative and groundbreaking ways, controverted hierarchical ways of thinking about humanity, and underscored the value of human diversity. His research in West Africa, the West Indies, and South America documented the far-reaching influence of African cultures in the Americas and underscored the vibrancy of African American cultures. After World War II, he played a prominent role in the development of African Studies programs in the United States, founding the first major interdisciplinary program in African studies at an American university, Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Herskovits was born in Bellefontaine, Ohio, in 1895 to Jewish immigrant parents, his mother from Germany and his father from Hungary. He had one sister. Growing up in a Jewish family in predominantly Protestant small towns, Herskovits struggled with questions about his cultural identity and his place in American society, foreshadowing his interests as a cultural anthropologist. During World War I, Herskovits served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. After the war, he earned an undergraduate degree in history at the University of Chicago and a master's degree in political science at Columbia University in New York, where he met Frances Shapiro (1897–1972), the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants. An aspiring writer, Shapiro married Herskovits in 1924 in Paris.

In 1920, Herskovits began doctoral studies in anthropology at Columbia University under

Franz Boas, the most influential American anthropologist of the early twentieth century. Boas trained a new generation of anthropologists, including Herskovits, to embrace the culture concept, which replaced the race concept as an explanation for human behavioral differences. Boas and his students argued that environmental and cultural influences, not race, were the primary determinants of human behavior and intelligence. By separating culture from race, Boas and his students refuted notions of white racial superiority that had been embraced by an earlier generation of Victorian anthropologists and biologists. At Columbia, Herskovits's classmates included future anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

Unlike most American anthropologists of his cohort who studied Native American cultures, Herskovits researched African and African American cultures, earning his Ph.D. in 1923 with a dissertation titled, "The Cattle Complex in East Africa." In this study, he employed the culture area methodology pioneered by Clark Wissler to argue that east Africa was a distinct culture area shaped by the cultural importance of cattle. Building on his use of the culture area methodology, Herskovits published journal articles that divided African into nine culture areas based largely on two broad economic divisions, agriculture and pastoralism. In his use of the culture area methodology, Herskovits rejected Wissler's embrace of a cultural hierarchy with Northern Europeans at the top. Instead, Herskovits employed Boas's concept of cultural relativism, which repudiated cultural hierarchies. Herskovits's work represented a significant move toward a value-free study of world cultures.

From 1923 to 1926, while teaching anthropology at Columbia University and at Howard University, in Washington, DC, Herskovits investigated the physical anthropology of black Americans. This research produced two books, *The American Negro* (1928), and *The Anthropometry of the Negro* (1930), in which Herskovits challenged the concept of race as a fixed, unchanging category. Herskovits's studies, along with those of other students of Franz Boas, notably Margaret Mead and Otto Klineberg, exposed the weaknesses of the biological interpretation of race and underscored the role of culture and environment in racial differences.

Herskovits did not gain a full-time faculty position until 1927, when Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois, hired him. Anti-Semitism likely limited Herskovits's teaching opportunities in an era when most American universities hired few, if any, Jewish faculty. At Northwestern, where he taught for thirty-six years until his death in 1963, Herskovits founded the anthropology department, which emphasized African and African American cultures. Before World War II, he taught most of the American anthropologists who specialized in Africa. During his long career, his students included anthropologists William Bascom, Joseph Greenberg, Hugh H. Smythe, Alan Merriam, Erika Bourguignon, George Simpson, Simon Ottenberg, Johnnetta B. Cole, and James W. Fernandez; political scientist Ralph Bunche; dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham; and historian Harvey Wish. Under his leadership, Northwestern became the leader in African anthropology in the United States.

From 1928 to 1941, Herskovits and his wife took field trips to Surinam, Dahomey, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil, marshaling evidence that demonstrated the richness and complexity of African and African American cultures and the considerable influence of African cultures in the Americas. In several ethnographies and in his magnum opus, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Herskovits challenged those who maligned black cultures and African cultures, including black and white liberal scholars who argued that black American culture was a pathological version of white culture with little or no African influence. At a time when most white Americans assumed black Americans to be inferior as a race and a culture, Herskovits's establishment of the strength and complexity of African and African-influenced cultures was an important intellectual achievement.

Herskovits's research on black cultures showed the diverse influences on American culture, helped to transform notions of American identity from exclusive and unitary (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) to inclusive and pluralist, and defined a dynamic view of cultural change that emphasized cultural diversity and cultural pluralism. He also articulated the doctrine of cultural relativism—the belief that cultures could not be ranked in a developmental hierarchy—argued for mutual respect among cultures, and attacked ethnocentric evaluations of cultures. Herskovits convinced anthropologists to accept acculturation studies as a vital part of the discipline, pushing anthropological study beyond its traditional focus on isolated, nonliterate societies.

Herskovits's relationship with black students and scholars was complex. Although he promoted African and African-American studies and advocated for research opportunities for black scholars, Herskovits also used his influence with philanthropies and learned societies to advance his own interests and, on occasion, limit black scholars' opportunities. He criticized some activist black scholars, notably Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois, whom he characterized as propagandists because of their social reform orientation. During the 1930s, Herskovits tried to discredit the Encyclopedia of the Negro project, which was edited by Du Bois. In the 1940s, as chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies' Committee on Negro Studies, Herskovits circumscribed black scholars' influence and undercut plans to protest limits on African Americans' access to archival collections and libraries in the American South. He also opposed the establishment of an African Studies program at Fisk University, a black college in Nashville, Tennessee, during World War II.

In 1940, Herskovits published *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples*, the first general study of comparative economics of non-literate cultures, and, in 1952, he published a revised version of that work, titled, *Economic Anthropology: A Study in Comparative Economics*. In these works, Herskovits emphasized the importance of social relationships and cultural values in economic decision making, while acknowledging the role of individual choice.

After World War II, Herskovits played a prominent role in the development of African studies programs at American universities. American involvement in the Second World War and the Cold War induced policymakers to advocate the creation of area studies programs to educate experts so that the United States could better implement policies to serve its global

interests. Herskovits successfully lobbied for foundation funding to create the first major interdisciplinary African studies program in the United States in 1948 at Northwestern University. In 1957, he helped found the African Studies Association, serving as its first president. Herskovits's support for African studies helped ensure that Africa would become a legitimate area of academic study.

In the context of Africa's drive for independence, Herskovits moved to the political stage to argue for African self-determination and a voice for Africans in international affairs. In 1947, he wrote the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Human Rights for the United Nations, opposing an ethnocentric formulation of human rights to ensure that a statement of human rights based on Western values would not be imposed on developing nations. From 1958 to 1960, Herskovits prepared an extensive report on Africa for the U.S. Senate and testified twice before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, criticizing America's Africa policy and advocating African self-determination. He challenged the Cold War paradigm, wherein U.S. foreign policymakers considered African countries as mere objects in the Soviet-American struggle for global hegemony. Herskovits argued that a collaborative process between Americans and Africans would advance United States-African relations, serve America's foreign policy interests, and improve life in Africa.

Herskovits's work on Africans and African Americans is inextricably connected to his embrace of cultural relativism, his attack on racial and cultural hierarchy, and his conceptualization of "Negro studies," which he defined as the study of peoples of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic, foreshadowing the emergence of African diaspora studies. Furthermore, Herskovits's work was designed to accord dignity to all cultures; he maintained that marginalized peoples were worthy of study in higher education and consideration in politics.

Further Reading

Baron, R. (2003). "Amalgams and Mosaics, Sycratisms and Reinterpretations: Reading Herskovits and Contemporary Creolists for Metaphors of Creolization." *Journal of American Folklore*, 116, 88-115.

Frank, G. (2001). "Melville J. Herskovits on the African and Jewish Diasporas: Race, Culture, and Modern Anthropology." *Identities*, 8, 173-209.

Gershenhorn, J. (2004). *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Gershenhorn, J. (2009). "'Not An Academic Affair': African American Scholars and the Development of African Studies Programs in the United States, 1942-1960." *Journal of African American History* 94, 44-68.

Jackson, W. A. (1986). "Melville J. Herskovits and the Search for Afro-American Culture." In W. Stocking (Ed.), *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality* (pp.



95-126). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Yelvington, K. A.(2001). "The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 227-260.

Yelvington, K. A.(2011). "Constituting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora, 1900-1950." *Black Scholar*, 41, 64-76.