

Mainstream or Marginal Boasian? An Intellectual Biography of Robert H. Lowie

Sergei Kan

Dartmouth College

2019

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Kan, Sergei, 2019. "Mainstream or Marginal Boasian? An Intellectual Biography of Robert H. Lowie", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL stable - Handle : 10670/1.2snel2 | URL Bérose : article1624.html

Publication Bérose : 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. (Tous droits réservés).

Votre utilisation de cet article présuppose votre acceptation des conditions d'utilisation des contenus du site de Bérose (www.berose.fr), accessibles [ici](#).

Consulté le 6 juillet 2022 à 14h23min

Why did Robert Lowie (1883-1957), considered a “mainstream Boasian” by both his colleagues and most historians of anthropology, felt somewhat underappreciated by Franz Boas himself and especially by Lowie’s peers: Alexander Goldenweiser (1880-1940), Edward Sapir (1884-1939), and Paul Radin (1883-1959), key members of the first generation of Boas’ students. [1]

Robert Lowie was born in Vienna in 1883 to a German-speaking Jewish father originally from Hungary [2] and a Viennese Jewish mother. When he was ten, his family brought him to New York where he grew up as a bilingual youngster in a middle-class German-Jewish intellectual milieu. Lowie retained his bilingualism and his Old World (and specifically Viennese-German) cultural tastes and habits for the rest of his life. [3] In 1897 he entered the City College of New York, concentrating first on Greek and Latin and later on science. Upon graduation in 1901, Lowie taught in the New York public schools for three years, while attending some summer courses in chemistry at Columbia University. His original plan to pursue a career in chemistry had to be abandoned once he realized that color blindness as well as a lack of mechanical and manual aptitude would make such a pursuit impossible (Kroeber 1957: 141). In 1904 Lowie enrolled in Columbia’s graduate program in anthropology. [4] His main mentor, Franz Boas (1858-1942), had a major influence on him as a scholar. Boas attracted the fledgling graduate student because, as Lowie reminisced many years later, ‘he inspired his students with a sense of the dignity of his science as a branch of knowledge that demanded as rigorous standards of research as any of the older disciplines.’

Moreover, as Paul Radin pointed out in Lowie's obituary, 'Boas had most of the German scholarly virtues that Lowie admired' (1958: 359).

However, during his first few years at Columbia, Boas maintained a significant distance from his Austrian born student and it was actually the department's adjunct professor by the name of Livingston Farrand (1867-1939) – in Lowie's words, 'an able teacher and executive' – who encouraged him 'to feel that he was not an utter failure' ('Relations with Boas,' pp. 4-5, Ctn. 3, f. 97, RHLP). It was also Farrand who urged Lowie to volunteer his services at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). Years later Lowie reminisced that 'Indirectly I owe to Farrand my first field trip, the subject of my doctoral dissertation, and my first position' (ibid.).

Besides Boas and Farrand, Clark Wissler (1870-1947), his supervisor at the AMNH, was another major mentor of Lowie's and it was Wissler who actually sent him on his first ethnographic research trip to the Lemhi Shoshoni of Idaho in 1906. While Lowie's first field work did not generate a significant amount of data, he did manage to collect a number of interesting myths and tales and that material helped him choose the subject for his doctoral dissertation 'The Test Theme in North American Mythology,' a topic Boas suggested to him. Throughout 1907-1908, while working on his Ph. D thesis, Lowie conducted several ethnographic expeditions, visiting the Stoney Assiniboine, the Northern Blackfoot and the Chipewyan of Alberta and the Crow of Montana. He did not stay with any of these indigenous groups for more than a month and collected his data only through interpreters. While enjoying some aspects of field research, Lowie always remained a city person who did not romanticize his travels in the West or camping with the Indians. He also retained some of the cultural biases of a Euro-American intellectual of his time, who was doing research among 'primitive' peoples. Like Boas and the Boasians Lowie was convinced that the 'traditional' American Indian cultures were dying and saw his task as an ethnographer to record them before they disappear. Thus, he became a major advocate of "salvage anthropology," a term some scholars actually attribute to him. Among the Native North Americans, he came in contact with, Lowie definitely favored the Crow. On the one hand, since many of the young and the middle-aged men on the Crow reservation could speak English, the Crow were a lot easier to work with than any of the other tribes he had encountered in the first few years of his field research. On the other hand, they seemed to have preserved more of the knowledge of their pre-reservation culture of warfare and buffalo-hunting that Lowie was so interested in. Finally, they appeared to him as a 'good-looking, impressive lot' (Lowie 1959: 20).

In 1908 upon the completion of his thesis, Lowie received his Ph.D. degree. Boas' official evaluation of his work is worth quoting, since it represents his opinion of Lowie as a young scholar, part of which persisted throughout three and a half decades of their relationship,

Mr. Lowie has mastered the available literature satisfactorily and has arranged the available data in such a way that his point of view comes out clearly. In working out the thesis under my direction, he has proved

himself a clear thinker, although lacking in originality, and being particularly strong in following out a given lead. As a contribution to anthropology, the thesis is very acceptable, since it points out the direction in which studies of mythology may be pursued to good advantage . . . (Boas to Lowie, October 18, 1907, FBP).

Lowie's mentor's praise is quite measured and the words 'lacking in originality' do stand out. Nonetheless, Boas did publish Lowie's thesis in the *Journal of American Folklore* as soon as he became its editor (Lowie 1908).

As both an undergraduate and a graduate student Lowie was very interested in the history and methodology of science and was a particularly devoted follower of the Austrian philosopher Ernst Mach, with whom he corresponded (Lowie 1947b). Lowie was also drawn to the work of such European psychologists and positivist philosophers as Wilhelm Wundt, Wilhelm Ostwald, and Karl Pearson. Along with Alexander Goldenweiser and Paul Radin, both graduate students of Boas, Lowie belonged to several informal discussion groups in New York, including the 'Pearson Circle,' the goal of which was the study of current issues in philosophy, psychology, and social science theory (Lowie 1956: 1012). He also shared the literary tastes and the political orientation of the first generation of Boas' graduate students. During his New York years, he espoused moderate socialist ideas and supported various leftwing and liberal causes, including socialism and feminism, and belonged to the Greenwich Village Liberal Club from 1913 until 1918. During that time, his articles and book reviews appeared in such publications as *The Masses*, *The Freeman*, *The Liberal Review*, *The Dial*, and *The New Republic*. However, once he became older and settled in California, the young anthropologist moderated his political views, while remaining a liberal for the rest of his life (see Kan 2015).

The one rather controversial position that Lowie took in his younger days was a pro-German sympathy, which he expressed during World War I. Although as a free-thinking liberal he must have understood the deep flaws of the imperial Germany political system, the German-Austrian part of his identity clearly affected his stand. In 1914 he published an article in the *New Review* entitled 'A Pro-German View', which stated that the war was basically a conflict between German and Russian imperialism and that he preferred the German variety because the latter at least brought progress with it. Of course, this left out the French and the British towards whom Lowie had mixed feelings expressed in his letters to Boas written during the war. Moreover, in the same article he noted that 'when internationalism and anti-militarism shall fight German nationalism and militarism' he would be on the side of internationalism (1914: 644). As one of his biographers points out, 'As political analysis, this article was abominable, and Lowie refrained from further comments after American entry into the war. Moreover, as an American patriot, he undoubtedly supported the war effort once United States entered the war in 1917' (Murphy 1972: 32). [5] At the same time his pro-German sympathies and his resentment against the anti-German hysteria that was strong in the country were quite similar to the sentiments of his Columbia mentor. Hence Lowie's words about Boas' own position during World War I could just as easily be applied to him: 'He was

an internationalist if ever there was one; but he was also steeped in the culture of his native land, he had close relatives living there, was linked by personal and professional ties with innumerable Germans' (Lowie 1947a: 307-308; Kan 2014). [6]

Until 1921 Lowie continued working at the AMNH, first as an Assistant and then as an Associate Curator, when he left New York for the University of California, Berkeley. His move from the East to the West Coast was made possible by Alfred L. Kroeber (1876-1960), another early student of Boas who founded Berkeley's anthropology department. After teaching there as a visitor in 1917-1918, Lowie moved there permanently in 1921, was promoted to full professor, and remained on the faculty of that department until 1950. In addition to teaching at Berkeley, he served as a visiting professor of anthropology at several American universities, including Columbia and Harvard, as well as University of Hamburg in Germany.

With Lowie's arrival, systematic training of graduate students in anthropology was firmly established at the University of California. While he and Kroeber taught several generations of (mainly graduate) students and took turns chairing the department, the more junior faculty members taught the undergraduate courses. Lowie was never considered a charismatic teacher, but his students did receive a thorough grounding in world ethnography and history of anthropology, while his command of ethnographic literature was considered to be truly encyclopedic. He was also widely admired by students and colleagues for his genuinely courteous manners and generosity of spirit. Here is how Robert F. Murphy, who taught at Berkeley during the last two years of Lowie's life, characterized him: 'Behind the forbidding aspect of the Germanic professor was a kind and shy man, totally committed to his discipline and his students, strictly observant of hierarchy of manners, but equally dedicated to egalitarianism in the realm of thought' (1972: 2).

Lowie was highly respected in his profession. For nine years (from 1923 to 1931) he was the editor of the *American Anthropologist*. He also served as the president of the American Folklore Society in 1916, the American Ethnological Society in 1920, and the American Anthropological Association in 1935, was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, and received the Viking Medal in Ethnology in 1948. After retiring in 1950, Lowie was much in demand as a visiting lecturer in the United States and abroad.

For many years Lowie remained a bachelor but in 1933 he married psychologist Luella Cole (1893-1970), who became his closest friend and travelling companion. Lowie died of cancer on September 21, 1957. He spent the last day of his life reading Goethe's *Faust*, his most beloved German work of literature.

Major Scholarly Contributions

As was already mentioned, Lowie's main ethnographic works dealt with the Crow Indians of the Great Plains. The study of Crow culture became his life-long project: he spent all or part of every summer between 1910 and 1916 among them and 'learned their language well enough

to attain a moderate degree of understanding and a reasonable facility in ordinary questioning' (Murphy 1972: 27). As a result of that research he published about two thousand pages of data on the Crow culture. In addition to the ethnographic research among the American Indian tribes mentioned above, he did some field work among the Ute, the Hidatsa, the Mandan, the Arikara, the Washo and the Hopi. Most of Lowie's ethnographic research was carried out under the auspices of the AMNH. Once he joined the Berkeley faculty, he only conducted some short visits to the Washo of Nevada and California in 1926 as well as his last trip to the Crow in 1931. Lowie tended to develop good rapport with his Native American consultants, most of them elderly men and women whom he meticulously interviewed about the "old culture" of their own younger days as well as that of their parents and grandparents. As he wrote in his posthumously published memoir,

Possibly the greatest compliment of my life was given me in a little restaurant just off the Crow reservation, where I heard one Indian tell another (in Crow), 'You see that white man over there? He looks like any other white man, but when he comes to campfire, you'd never know him from an Indian.' I feel that my ability to enter into the Indians' own attitudes and to convince them of my genuine interest in them has been my chief asset as a practicing ethnologist (1959: 171).

Paul Radin (1958: 360), himself an experienced and very productive fieldworker, characterized Lowie as 'one of the best ethnographers of his day.'

Most scholars believe that Lowie's contributions to anthropological theory were not as significant as those of the other early Boasians, such as Edward Sapir, Radin, Kroeber and Goldenweiser. However, a number of his books and articles did make an important impact on the discipline at the time of their publication and some have continued to do so long thereafter. His general theoretical orientation can be described as being "mainstream Boasian." Like his main mentor, Lowie emphasized cultural relativism as opposed to late nineteenth-early twentieth century social evolutionism. His book *Primitive Society* (1920) established him as a main opponent of evolutionism in American anthropology, while his more popular work *Are We Civilized?* (1929) questioned the common assumption that technological and economic progress inevitably lead to moral progress.

Generally speaking Lowie was a dedicated empiricist and positivist who viewed cultural anthropology as a science, trusted facts and mistrusted any theorizing that he viewed as unsubstantiated. Many of his specific theoretical positions can be characterized as middle-of-the-road. Thus, for example, on the question of the correlation of semantic categories in kinship terminologies, on the one hand, and social organization and behavior, on the other, he advocated a position in between American historical and British functional ones. Similarly, while he shared some of the arguments put forward by the proponents of the theory of cultural diffusion, he rejected their more radical speculations. [7] He did not trust the Freudian generalizations of the early culture and personality studies as well as any speculations about the psychology of a people, which could not be backed up by solid ethnographic data. [8]

Lowie is best known for his study of kinship and fictitious kinship groups that was central to his wide-ranging comparative research on clans, phratries, and moieties. His numerous works on kinship not only demolished the erroneous arguments of L.H. Morgan, while also emphasizing its positive contributions), but also made some lasting contributions to the subsequent studies of this subject. It is this work that had a major impact on the American historical tradition of kinship studies spearheaded by Fred Eggan, the British functional approach to kinship and social organization, and even the work of Lévi-Strauss on the same subjects. Lowie's also carried out important research on the development and functioning of political institutions including the state (1927).

He was also interested in religion and published a number of articles on various aspects of the Plains Indians' religion as well as a book on *Primitive Religion* (1924). This was one major work of his where he explicitly approached a cultural phenomenon from a psychological point of view. The type of psychology he used, however, was behaviorist. Rejecting Durkheim's approach to religion as a system of collective/symbolic representations, Lowie viewed it as a 'system of subjective meanings that somehow or other give individual satisfaction' (Murphy 1972: 73). It also appears that his view of religion had been influenced by the type of religious phenomena he encountered among the Crow and other Plains Indians. A number of his peers, including Goldenweiser, Radin and Sapir, found the book to be weak, criticizing Lowie for his failure to go beyond the description of religious phenomena and their diffusion in order to reach their true spiritual and emotional significance (Reflections on Goldenweiser's "Recent Trends in American Anthropology," p. 4; Ctn. 2, folder 96, RHL; Murphy 1972: 73). [9]

Not surprisingly, some of Lowie's most original contributions to anthropological method and theory are found in his studies of specific ethnographic cases rather than his general works. For example, the historical and comparative summaries at the end of his work on Plains Indian age-societies (1916) were praised even by the most empirically oriented Boasians. They are among the best examples of the kind of comparative and historical interpretation produced by that school. Lowie was also very fond of and good at summarizing other scholars' views. As Radin pointed out, this found 'its highest expression in his *History of Ethnological Theory* but is also shown in his numerous reviews, of which he wrote more than two hundred' (1958: 360).

Besides his ethnographic writing on indigenous North Americans, Lowie is known for his participation in the seven-volume *Handbook of South American Indians* edited by Julian Steward (1946-1959). Lowie's contribution included "several ethnographic sections as well as comparative summaries of social and political organization and property among the Marginal and tropical Forest tribes of the jungle and savannah lowlands" (Murphy 1972: 38). His interest in indigenous South America actually began in the 1930s, when he started his decade-long collaboration with a prominent German-Brazilian anthropologist, the legendary Curt Nimuendajú (1883-1945) (see, for example, Lowie and Nimuendajú 1937) (Murphy 1972: 37-38).

Lowie on German Culture: Limitations of Scientific Objectivity

Two works of Lowie, both of which dealt with the culture and history of the German-speaking peoples, stand very much outside his large corpus of ethnographic and ethnological publications and receive relatively little attention. He first stumbled on this topic seemingly by accident. During World War II, Lowie contributed to the war effort by participating in a training course on German culture for the Army. The lectures he delivered resulted in a short book entitled *The German People: A Social Portrait to 1914* (Lowie 1945). This work, which Lowie described as a study of the social psychology of the Germans, was based on historical materials as well as his own “lifelong familiarity with Germans, their language and culture” (Lowie 1945: I). This research project was also clearly the author’s journey back his own ethnic/cultural roots. That journey continued after the war, when he and his wife conducted ethnographic research in Germany between September 1950 and March 1951. They travelled throughout the country and talked to people from all walks of life and read a great deal of writing by Germans (both academics and ordinary people) and about Germany. That project resulted in a much more substantial work, *Toward Understanding Germany*, published in 1954.

As far as the two books’ main argument goes, it was definitely vintage Lowie. He rejected the idea that German culture was a homogenous whole and instead presented it as a mix of different traits. In a typical Boasian fashion, he argued that the German people were unified neither by race, language, or culture, and all the traits within each of these domains experienced change over time (cf. Bargheer 2017: 148). Both works, and especially the second one, did contain some insightful observations about the German ‘national character’ in general and that of the specific social classes. Nonetheless their overall contribution to a distinctly anthropological understanding of German culture was quite limited, something a number of reviewers pointed out. At best they represented a useful summary of some existing literature combined with anecdotal data and personal impressions.

One definite conclusion a reader could not help drawing from both studies was the author’s consistent efforts to be objective and avoid value judgments, even when describing German anti-Semitism and the crimes of the Nazi regime. As a result of all this, portions of both books read as an apology for the Germans, who were just emerging from the dark years of Nazism, and this is how a number of critics characterized them. Thus, quite troubling was Lowie’s argument that German anti-Semitism was not particularly unique but a version (albeit a violent one at times) of a universal human trait of dislike for the ethnic or racial Other. In the 1954 study, he also insisted that Nazi ideology in general and especially the fascists’ intense hatred for the Jews, which resulted in their eventual extermination, was not as widely shared by the German population as many post-war scholars and non-academic observers had argued. Equally disturbing was his assertion that by “overcrowding” certain professions and refusing to fully assimilate German culture, Jews were at least partially responsible for antisemitism. [10]

Anticipating criticism that he was being too soft on German anti-Semitism and Nazism, Lowie defended his steadfast commitment to “scientific objectivity” in the 1954 book itself as

well as in a paper “Empathy or ‘Seeing from Within’” published posthumously (Lowie 1954; 1960). As he put it, “Though he [ethnologist] must deal with values as part of his phenomena, he is a scientist, whose business is not to pass moral judgments but to describe and, as far as possible, to explain the segment of reality under discussion. What would be thought of a modern zoologist who should denounce the wickedness of a rattlesnake?” (1954:29).

The issue raised by Lowie was a complicated one. On the one hand, he was advocating one of the tenets of Boasian anthropology: the need to understand cultural phenomena ‘from the native point of view’ and the related idea of cultural relativism. On the other hand, he was taking cultural relativism to the extreme by arguing that even mass murder and genocide, if studied by an ethnologist, had to be documented and interpreted without judging it. Moreover, Lowie failed to see that his own interpretation of German history and culture, including the most sensitive subjects of German anti-Semitism and Nazism, was far from objective. His own cultural biases of an assimilated German-speaking Viennese Jewish intellectual, whose identity was deeply grounded in German *Kultur* of Schiller and Goethe, clearly influenced his choice of data and the manner of presenting it. As one of his critics pointed out,

When he [Lowie] discusses German behavior toward Jews during the Nazi period, episodes involving help and risk strike one less as instances of human greatness and dignity than as entries in a ledger. The effect is ‘on the one hand, on the other,’ which may convey ‘objectivity’ but keeps the subject matter at best in the museum... The taboo on value judgments excludes from analysis what can only be perceived by means of them – notably political and moral phenomena. Judgment intrudes anyway either directly or in the form of questionable parallels. ... (Wolf 1954: 200).

As a matter of fact, looking back on the last major research project of his scientific career Lowie admitted that he was searching for a confirmation of his own ethnic/cultural identity and values. In his own words, the German research ‘satisfied a real personal need to formulate in my own mind the nature of my own heritage, to *investigate from an objective point of view something I had always known*’ [italics mine - SK] (Lowie 1959: 145).

Lowie and the Boasian “Anthropological Intelligentsia”

Lowie always felt somewhat of an outsider among the first generation of Boas’ most prominent students, such as Edward Sapir, Paul Radin, Alexander Goldenweiser, Alfred L. Kroeber and a few others, as well as the next one, whose female members, such as Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) and Margaret Mead (1901-1978) affectionately referred to Boas as ‘Papa Franz.’ In several of his unpublished essays he somewhat derisively referred to these men and women as the ‘anthropological intelligentsia.’ This was partly due to Lowie’s permanent departure from the East in 1921. But there was more to it. In his unpublished manuscript cited earlier, Lowie wrote that in his relationship with his former mentor there was a ‘very definite absence of anything like the filial relationship that united many others to Boas’ (‘Relations with Boas,’ p. 13, Ctn. 3, f. 97, RHLF). Nonetheless, the same manuscript also

states that the two of them did 'get considerably closer as the years went by' (ibid.).



Robert Lowie with a group of fellow anthropologists of his generation, ca. 1910-1915.

Standing (l to r): Thomas Talbot Waterman, Paul Radin, Robert H. Lowie, Wilson D. Wallis, Bishop (?); sitting (l to r): Joseph(?), Alexander Goldenweiser. (Identification of the people is based on handwritten notes on the margins of a similar photograph from Robert H. Lowie Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California.)

Photograph from Sergei Kan's personal collection.

Over the years Boas' view of Lowie's work also improved. According to Lowie's reminiscences, Boas particularly valued his former student's publication on the Plains Indians' age-societies and told him that his 1924 *Primitive Society* was an 'awfully good book' (Reflections on Goldenweiser's "Recent Trends in American Anthropology", p. 16; Ctn. 2, folder 96, RHLP). And while introducing Lowie to senior Russian anthropologists Vladimir Bogoraz (1865-1936) and Lev Shternberg (1861-1927) at the 1924 International Congress of Americanists, Boas referred to him as 'the most learned of the younger American anthropologists' (ibid.).

Despite this praise, Lowie always believed that his mentor had a higher opinion of Sapir, Radin and several of his other students. He also felt strongly that, unlike them, he did not worship Boas and was able to see more objectively both his tremendous accomplishments and strengths as well as his shortcomings as a scholar and a human being (see Lowie 1944, 1947a, "Reflections on Goldenweiser's 'Recent Trends in American Anthropology,'" Ctn. 2, f. 96, RHLP).

Lowie's impression of being an outsider among the Boasians was further reinforced by what he viewed as a rather nasty parting shot delivered against him by Goldenweiser (1941), a close friend of his early years in New York, with whom he had a falling out in 1914 but was later able to restore a certain degree of collegiality and amicability. [11] Published in the *American Anthropologist* one year after Goldenweiser's death and entitled 'Recent Trends in American Anthropology' the paper read as a thoughtful (if somewhat idiosyncratic and sketchy) evaluation of the work of the leading American anthropologists of several generations. It also seemed to be a kind of a settling of accounts by this 'rebellious Boasian,' who himself was always somewhat of an outsider in the discipline due to a career that was much less

successful than those of the other members of his cohort (with the exception of Radin) and whose publication record was smaller than that of his peers (though quite significant if one considers his works in the broader social sciences), as well as to certain 'indiscretions' that Boas and many of the Boasians did not approve of (see Kan 2013, 2015, n.d.).

In his article Goldenweiser evaluated the work of four Boasians: Kroeber, Sapir, Radin and Lowie, although he characterized only the last three as the members of 'the Boas school in the narrow sense' (1941: 158). Of the four, Sapir received the highest marks, being described as a 'genius,' in whose work Goldenweiser found very little to criticize. Kroeber's and Radin's scholarly contributions were also evaluated with a lot more praise than criticism. Radin in particular was applauded for being the 'most inspired' American field-worker as well as a scholar who often displayed great imagination and very fruitful 'hunches.'

However, when it came to Lowie, Goldenweiser mixed rather mild praise with condescending criticism. Thus, he contrasted Lowie's 'scientific personality' unfavorably to those of Sapir and Radin and damned him with faint praise by stating the following: 'Not so richly endowed by nature and markedly unimaginative, he is scholarly by life-long inclination and deeply steeped in the proprieties of scientific procedure' (ibid.: 159). Moreover, he also described the California anthropologist as a 'sort of Gibraltar of scientific orthodoxy in American anthropology' (ibid.). Lowie's fieldwork was characterized favorably as being 'prolonged and thorough,' but was also labeled 'unimaginative.' At the same time, like Boas, Goldenweiser offered high praise to Lowie's *Plains-Indian Age-Societies: Comparative and Historical Summary* as well as his papers on kinship.

It is clear from this comparison of Lowie with Sapir and Radin that 'Goldie' favored those anthropologists who possessed creative imagination and were unafraid to use it in their work. It is also quite obvious that he included himself in that category. At the same time, to be fair to Lowie Goldenweiser did admit that, if combined with this kind of imagination, Lowie's refusal to be satisfied with 'anything short of demonstrability' was a valuable trait for a social scientist to possess and chided Radin for lacking it (ibid.). Still his brief evaluation of his former close friend's scholarship was undoubtedly seen by the latter as condescending, unfair and hurtful.

So hurtful indeed that following its publication, the Berkeley anthropologist composed a thirteen-page 'Reflections' on the Goldenweiser paper. Not intending to publish it, he sent it to a number of colleagues. [12] In his response Lowie concentrated mainly on Goldenweiser's verdict that his work lacked imagination, a verdict that in Lowie's view was shared more or less by the other three 'big Boasians' discussed in Goldenweiser's paper. As a scholar dedicated wholeheartedly to an ethnology based entirely on facts, Lowie raised a fundamental question, 'What, at bottom, is imagination?' (Reflections on Goldenweiser's "Recent Trends in American Anthropology," p. 5; Ctn. 2, folder 96, RHL). After presenting a few examples of Sapir's 'imaginative' ideas in the field of American Indian linguistics, which later proved to be incorrect, Lowie concluded with a rather sarcastic remark aimed at his critics:

The scientific imagination, then, cannot be gauged by the number of ideas expressed, partly because some of these ideas are not worth expressing, partly because certain temperaments check the expression of their ideas until they are perfectly satisfied as to their tenability, whereas others speak out their thoughts untrammelled by such a sense of responsibility (ibid:10).

He then added that 'the scientific imagination ought to maintain some contacts with the world of reality' (ibid.). Lowie admitted that imagination was indeed related to a more positive trait he referred to as 'suggestibility,' which might be the reason why all of his Boasian critics, and especially Radin and Sapir, had been at one time or another responsive to psychoanalysis, while he had not. In his view this trait, which Goldenweiser called an 'aesthetic component' of their make-up, made them 'excellent field workers absorbed in concrete situations' (ibid.:12). However, from Lowie's point of view, such susceptibility, had a negative side as well. Thus he pointed out that, while both Sapir and Radin could often detect specific traits of persons and things that long escaped his own notice, 'they would experience such intense emotional delight or suffering from what they sensed that they could no longer see the phenomenon as a totality,' which led to totally contradictory judgments they would make over a short span of time (ibid.). His own verdict was that such 'unusual gifts' that Sapir, Radin and Goldenweiser possessed could be called 'imagination in a higher sense.' Using an example from one of the trio's biography, rather than field work, Lowie pointed out that Goldenweiser's 'imagination' did not help him 'grasp the essence of American life' despite having spent forty years living in the country (ibid.). [13]

In his obituary of Lowie, A.L. Kroeber, whose own work became more speculative and theory-oriented as he aged, echoed some of Goldenweiser's criticism of the limitations of Lowie's anthropology. However, unlike Goldenweiser, Kroeber presented Lowie's stubborn empiricism in a more positive light. Moreover, it would have been unseemly to use an obituary to evaluate one's old colleague's scholarship too critically. In any case, here is what Lowie's number one colleague from Berkeley said about his brand of anthropology:

Lowie's strongest individual faculty was reason. He distrusted intuition until sustained by accumulated facts... His judgment was unusually detached, fair, and sound. Wide speculation he feared as likely to become an end in itself. His science was genuinely rational, but even more strongly limited by the evidence. . . . Trained by Boas, Lowie remained perhaps the best exemplification of the Boasian current of thought. . . The current focused on culture but took in the whole range of human activities; it demanded control of ordered bodies of knowledge, and therefore stressed the salvage or irreplaceable data; it aimed at ever-broadening or deepening interpretation — "theory," if one will—but arrived at from testable and impartially tested evidence (Kroeber 1957: 145-146).

Perhaps Robert Murphy (1972: 74), who had a great deal of respect for Lowie and his brand of anthropology, expressed the same idea best:

The weaknesses of *Primitive Religion* reflect certain of the weaknesses of Lowie as an anthropologist. His rigid scientism, a view of method that was better adapted to the study of matter than of man, produced an empiricism that stifled generalization, and sometimes even thought. Arguments frequently became lost in a welter of facts piled upon facts without selection and restraint. He used data as a control over generalizations, which is how an anthropologist should operate. But every time he neared a conclusion, he would couch his results in a series of cautions and exceptions... Lowie's scientific universe was a mechanical one which did not allow for vagary and fluidity. The tidiness of his world view thus produced a looseness of results, for he overlooked order by his insistence there should be more.

Conclusion:

Despite being in many ways the most Boasian of the early Boasians, Lowie clearly saw himself as somewhat of an outsider among them, and an underappreciated one at that. One of the main reasons for this was clearly the kind of anthropology he was firmly committed to: empirical and skeptical about generalizations and theorizing. He definitely lacked the flair and the imagination of Goldenweiser, Radin and Sapir whose work inspired and attracted more attention (and continues to do so) thanks to their ability to see the forest for the trees. Moreover, the broad scholarly interests as well as the style of writing of these three scholars made their work more appealing to the more *humanities-oriented* scholars and as well the educated general public. Lowie's positivist and *scientific* anthropology, despite its strengths and accomplishments, paled by comparison.

Lowie's sense of marginality among his peers and colleagues also resulted from his not feeling completely at home in America. As Murphy (1972: 42-43) put it, "A German in America, he proved also to be an American in Germany. He never exactly fitted in anywhere, for the Germany of his mind was that of his father and grandfather, whereas the America of his life was the middle-class German community of the upper East Side of New York."

And then there was Lowie's personality summed up eloquently by Murphy:

Wherever he was, he was able to stand off from an ambience that did not envelop and include him. He was *degagé* and estranged, surrounded by a shell of formality which protected him from a world in which he did not really belong. His total decorum also served to shield a very vulnerable and sensitive person who committed himself so totally to friendships that only the appearance of aloofness allowed him to survive human relations.

In the end, however, Murphy saw this important trait of Lowie's personality in a positive light, pointing out that "It is this quality that all who knew him remember fondly. But beyond the fact that he was indeed a lovely man, this simultaneous capacity for cultural removal and personal closeness is a testimonial to his total identity as an ethnologist" (ibid.).

References

Archival Collections

Franz Boas Papers, American Philosophical Society (FBP).

Robert H Lowie Papers. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (RHLP).

Published Works

Bargheer, Stefan. 2017. Anthropology at War: Robert H. Lowie and the Transformation of the Culture Concept, 1904 to 1954. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 53(2): 133-154.

Goldenweiser, Alexander. 1941. Recent Trends in American Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 43 (2, part 1): 151-163.

Kan, Sergei. 2013. Goldenweiser. *Encyclopedia of Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology* Vol. I: 348-351. R. John McGee and Richard L. Warms, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Kan, Sergei. 2014. Robert Lowie's Pro-German Sympathies in 1914-1917. Unpublished paper in author's possession.

Kan, Sergei. 2015. The Falling-Out between Alexander Goldenweiser and Robert Lowie: Two Personalities, Two Visions of Anthropology. In F. W. Gleach & R. Darnell, eds., *Corridor Talk to Culture History: Public Anthropology and Its Consequence. Histories of Anthropology Annual*, vol. 9: 1-31. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Kan, Sergei. n.d. *A Rebellious Boasian: Alexander Goldenweiser's Life and Work*. Manuscript in preparation.

Kroeber, A.L. 1957. Robert Lowie. Biographical Memoirs. *Yearbook of American Biography* (1957): 141-145.

Lowie, Robert H. 1908. The Test-Theme in North American Mythology. *Journal of American Folklore* 21: 97-148.

Lowie, Robert H. 1914. A Pro-German View. *The New Review* 2: 642-644.

Lowie, Robert H. 1915. Psychology and Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology* XXI: 217-229.

Lowie, Robert H. 1916. Plains Indians Age-Societies: Historical and Comparative Summary. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 11, part 13.

Lowie, Robert H. 1920. *Primitive Society*. New York: Boni & Liveright.

Lowie, Robert H. 1924. *Primitive Religion*. New York: Boni & Liveright.

Lowie, Robert H. 1927. *The Origin of the State*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

- Lowie, Robert H. 1929. *Are We Civilized?* New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1944. Franz Boas (1858-1942). *Journal of American Folklore* 5: 59-64.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1945. *The German People: A Social Portrait to 1914*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1947a. Biographical Memoir of Franz Boas (1858-1942). *National Academy of Sciences, Ninth Memoir*, 24: 303-322.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1947b. Letters from Ernst Mach to Robert Lowie. *Isis* 37: 65-68.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1951. Some Problems of Geographic Distribution. *Südseestudien*. Pp. 11-26. Basel: Museum für Völkerkunde.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1954. *Toward Understanding Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1956. Reminiscences of Anthropological Currents in America Half a Century Ago. *American Anthropologist* 58 (6): 995-1016.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1959. *Robert H. Lowie Ethnologist*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1960. Empathy, or 'Seeing from Within.' Pp. 145-159 In Stanley Diamond, ed. *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Murphy, Robert F. 1972. *Robert H. Lowie*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press
- Radin, Paul. 1958. Robert H Lowie, 1883-1957. *American Anthropologist* 60(2), 358-375.
- Steward, Julian H., ed. 1946-1959. *Handbook of South American Indians*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Steward, Julian H. 1974. Robert Harry Lowie, 1883-1957. *National Academy of Sciences. Biographical Memoir*: 175-211.
- Wolf, Kurt. 1954. Review of *Toward Understanding Germany*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 295: 199-200

[1] Some of the material and ideas featured in this essay first appeared in my paper "The Falling-Out between Alexander Goldenweiser and Robert Lowie: Two Personalities, Two Visions of Anthropology." *Corridor Talk to Culture History: Public Anthropology and Its Consequence. Histories of Anthropology Annual*, vol. 9: 1-31.

[2] Robert Lowie's genealogical chart composed by his wife indicates that his father's last name 'Lowie' was based on a common Hungarian Jewish last name 'Lévai,' which in turn was a modification of a very

common Jewish last name 'Levi' or 'Levy' ('Biographical data, 1917-1957,' Ctn. 1, f. 4, RHLP).

[3] Paul Radin, who knew Lowie very well, emphasized this point in his friend's obituary, 'This late nineteenth and early twentieth century German-Austrian culture with its broad and variegated interests, its customs, its formalities, its virtues, and its idiosyncrasies, he was never to give up. The image of that culture — in many ways nostalgic and overidealized — always had a tremendous hold on him' (Radin 1958: 359).

[4] Lowie also chose psychology as his minor and studied under Columbia's two major psychologists, James Cattell and his student Robert Woodworth. Even though he was never viewed as a scholar who introduced psychology into American anthropology the way Sapir, Goldenweiser or Mead did, he did address the relationship between psychology and culture in several of her works beginning with a 1915 essay 'Psychology and Sociology' and continuing throughout his entire career (cf. Murphy 1972: 12).

[5] A document dated June 11, 1917 stated that, "pursuant to the provisions of the Military Law of the State of New York," he had been enrolled in the New York State Militia (Ctn. 1, f. 4, RHLP)

[6] It is worth mentioning that Lowie's pro-German view clashed strongly with an anti-German and pro-Russian/pro-Allies views of Sapir and Goldenweiser who, unlike Lowie, were of Eastern European (Jewish) descent (Kan 2015a:7).

[7] One of the best examples of Lowie's effective application of a 'cautiously diffusionist' approach is his 1951 article 'Some Problems of Geographic Distribution,' which discusses similarities between Native American myths from Tierra del Fuego and western North America.

[8] For that reason, he reacted very negatively to Margaret Mead's 1935 book *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. In a letter to sociologist William Ogburn, he described it as "not science, nor any semblance of science" (RL to Ogburn, October 3, 1935, FBP). As Lowie later reminisced, this caused one of his very few confrontations with Boas. ('Relations with Boas,' p. 14, Ctn. 3, f. 97, RHLP).

[9] According to Lowie, 'Radin told Nelson that here was I, who had never had a religious emotion in my life, writing a book on religion!' (Reflections on Goldenweiser's 'Recent Trends in American Anthropology' ", p. 4, Ctn. 2, f. 96, RHLP).

[10] In fairness to Lowie it should be pointed out that in his private correspondence he consistently expressed strong anti-Nazi views. For a fervent admirer of the legacy of German enlightenment and liberalism like him, the establishment of the Nazi regime was an enormous blow, which he tried very hard to make sense of. At the same time, as Murphy (1972: 39) points out and as my own exploration of Lowie's archive suggests, between 1933 and 1945 he did not publish any anti-Nazi articles or other public statements. Was it simply because in contrast to his younger years when he did speak out publicly about the war in Europe, as a mature scholar he chose to be engaged in academic work only or was it also due to the fact that openly attacking Germany made him uncomfortable?

[11] For details of Lowie's complicated relationship with Goldenweiser see Kan (2015).

[12] Having discovered it in 2012 among Lowie's papers in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, I published it as an *Appendix* to a paper on his relationship with Goldenweiser (Kan 2015: 15-24).

[13] I am not sure how fair such criticism was coming from Lowie who in many ways remained a German-Speaking Viennese throughout his entire life even though compared to Goldenweiser, he was more of an American (cf. Radin 1958: 358-359; Kan n.d.).