

The Anthropologist as Cultural Historian: Alfred Kroeber and the Forging of a Discipline

Stanley Brandes

University of California, Berkeley

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Cet article fait partie d'une série de six communications présentées le 19 novembre 2021, lors d'une session intitulée "Alfred L. Kroeber : The Man, His Work and His Legacy", organisée pendant la réunion annuelle de l'American Anthropological Association (AAA). Le 27 janvier 2021, l'Université de Berkeley (Californie) a débaptisé le "Kroeber Hall" qui abrite le département et le musée d'anthropologie - institutions fondées par Kroeber. Il nous a semblé intéressant d'offrir en lecture dans Bérose ces six contributions discutées en novembre. Sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité, elle offrent des éclairages complémentaires sur l'oeuvre d'une figure majeure de l'histoire de l'anthropologie états-unienne. Participaient à cette session : Herbert S. Lewis (organisateur, Université du Wisconsin-Madison), Stanley Brandes (Université de Californie, Berkeley), James Stanlaw (président, Illinois State University), Jack Glazier (Oberlin College), Nicholas Barron (Mission College), et Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Université de Californie, Berkeley).

Alfred Kroeber's career should be understood largely as a crusade to define and establish—intellectually and institutionally—what was in his day a still largely new discipline: anthropology. He did this in two ways, first through practical demonstration, specifically the practice and promotion of fieldwork methods, and second, through theoretical inquiry, particularly exploration of the culture concept. Largely due to his efforts, the cultural domain became associated in the United States (and beyond) almost exclusively with anthropology, thereby creating a niche that attracted the creation of academic appointments—appointments directed towards research into culture writ small and large, past and present. Kroeber's investigations spanned the full range of human phenomena, from detailed ethnography, as illustrated in much of his California native research, to global transformations in human artistic, philosophical and other endeavors taking place over the course of millennia. In this sense, he pushed anthropology beyond the bounds of small-scale, non-Western, non-literate societies into the realm of civilizational history.

Kroeber's work must be approached with humility. By the time of his death in 1960, he had long been one of the most eminent and productive anthropologists in the world, and had certainly become the foremost spokesperson of American anthropology. The quantity of his published writing staggers the imagination. In the most complete bibliography of Kroeber's publications, Gibson and Rowe (1961) list over five hundred and thirty separate items, and believe that there exist dozens that they could not locate. Still more—and this detail distinguishes Kroeber from other highly distinguished and influential anthropologists of his day—Kroeber's voluminous writings range over all the major subdisciplines of anthropology, from archaeology and linguistics to biological anthropology and ethnology.

Among the innumerable ethnographic and theoretical areas to which Kroeber made significant contributions, culture change stands out as one of the most prominent, and it is specifically to this aspect of his work that I direct my attention. Although his work on change may be found in numerous publications, released at various times over the course of half a century, the major theoretical contributions are concentrated in a few choice sources. Much of Kroeber's general text *Anthropology* (1948; first published in 1923) is devoted to culture change, as are large sections of *the Nature of Culture* (1952), a comprehensive, self-edited collection of what he considered to be his most important articles and other miscellaneous writings. Kroeber's monumental *Configurations of Culture Growth* (1944), an eight hundred and fifty-page volume on which he worked intermittently over seven years, presents a comparative history in which he matches some of his most important concepts of pattern development against a vast range of empirical data. Subsequent publications that primarily concern the problem of change include *Style and Civilizations* (1963b; first published in 1957) and the posthumous *An Anthropologist Looks at History* (1963a), a compendium of articles produced during the final decade of his life.

Throughout his lengthy career, Kroeber maintained a vigorous interest in cultural development, and in fact thought of his own brand of anthropology as basically historical in orientation. In exploring change, Kroeber tried, first, to confine his analyses to cultural as opposed to social phenomena. Generally, said Kroeber, culture comprises “that which the human species has and other social species lack” (1948 [1923]:253). His text continues, “This would include speech, knowledge, beliefs, customs, arts and technologies, ideals and rules...in short...what we learn from other men, from our elders or the past, plus what we may add to it” (ibid.). Kroeber refrains from stating that in reality the cultural level is distinct from others. Nonetheless, he advocated, and consistently followed, the methodological procedure of acting *as if* culture were an autonomous epistemological realm. In this respect, among others, he helped to define a specifically American brand of anthropology, distinct from the British, for example, in which anthropology was viewed—at least in his day—as a sub-discipline of sociology.

In addition to confining his analyses to what he called culture, Kroeber renounced causality as an object of study. Early in his career, in fact, he did believe that he could discover “vague, grand forces of predestination” (1952:9). In time, however, he came to the conclusion that

causal connections are too numerous and complex to be accurately discerned, and hence anthropologists should concentrate on description at the cultural level. In his words, “The what and the how must be determined, analyzed, and organized before we can hope to penetrate adequately as to their why” (1963b [1957]: 2). These two methodological principles—the isolation of cultural phenomena and the emphasis on description rather than causation—form the basis of Kroeber’s work on culture change. His rejection of psychological, economic, environmental, social and other causative factors was probably designed—and to his mind served—to preserve the purity of cultural description.

Kroeber’s earliest work (1948 [1923]) on change demonstrates the indelible influence of his mentor, Franz Boas. These explorations constitute perhaps his least original, if intellectually safest, contribution to the topic. In a foreshadowing of more ambitious research, Kroeber shows interest in what he calls culture “growth,” meaning in a word, the accumulation of cultural items, be they technological, intellectual, or social. Cultures grow, states Kroeber, through two processes: the internal mechanisms (mostly independent invention) by which a culture adds to its total inventory, on the one hand, and external forces leading to that outcome, on the other. For Kroeber, something new cannot be called an invention unless it becomes fully accepted and integrated within the existing culture. Until that time, it has no lasting meaning beyond its mere existence (1948 [1923]:352).

By and large, inventions may be called independent in the sense that, despite influence from the overarching cultural milieu, the idea of an invention is essentially original to the inventor. In addition to independent inventions, however, Kroeber discusses a large category of inventions that are inspired by contact with outside cultures. Invention by “stimulus diffusion,” as he calls it, occurs when “the idea of the complex or system” spreads beyond cultural boundaries, “but it remains for the receiving culture to develop a new content” (1952:344). Kroeber’s prime example of this process is the case of Chinese porcelain (1948 [1923]:369; 1952:345), the mere knowledge of which gave Europeans an incentive to develop methods for its manufacture. Here, “A goal or objective was set by something previously existing in another culture; the originality was limited to achieving the mechanisms by which this goal could be achieved” (1952:345).

Kroeber’s understanding of inventions extended to what he called simultaneous inventions, those that were made by two or more persons during the same year or within a very few years of one another. After presenting a long list of supporting instances from the fields of science and technology (1948 [1923]:342), he states, “A list like this tends to instill a conviction that inventions may be inevitable, within certain limits; that given a certain constellation and development of a culture, certain inventions must be made. Such a conclusion involved the recognition of super-individual forces—historical agencies or social currents transcending personalities (ibid.: 342-343). This theme—the delineation of which Kroeber often termed the “superorganic” (1952:22-51)—is reiterated and extensively expanded upon in much of Kroeber’s work on change.

Nonetheless, for Kroeber the most prevalent mechanism by which cultures grow is diffusion,

the transmission of traits or trait complexes from one culture to another (1948 [1923]:257; 1963a:8). To illustrate, he devised a diagram of the tree of culture (1948 [1923]:260) with its branches, symbolizing different cultures, merging and coalescing into one another and then splitting off again in distinct directions. Unlike biological species, which evolve through constant differentiation and diversification, cultures, according to Kroeber, “are always tending to equate themselves by imparting their characteristics to one another, even while another set of impulses pushes each of them toward particularistic peculiarity” (ibid.:260).

For Kroeber, the process of diffusion implies the notion of culture area, and with it, the assumption that some regions within an area are culturally richer or more heavily loaded than others. Kroeber does not envision a simple outward flow of cultural elements from regions of high cultural concentration to regions with—in a word—less culture, or, using jargon of the day, fewer cultural traits. For a variety of reasons, cultures might resist diffusion, mainly because alien cultural elements do not fit into their existing cultural patterns. This resistance results in what Kroeber calls “internal marginality,” that is, a quality of cultures that remain culturally sparse despite being located close to regions of rich cultural inventory. To make these ideas more concrete requires substantial counting of cultural traits, a quantitative endeavor that is itself highly problematic. Nonetheless, in Kroeber’s times, the concept of internal marginality represented a significant modification of classical diffusionism.

In a surprising departure from Kroeber’s Boasian origins, he also introduces the notion of progress. He states, “in an over-all sort of way the sum culture of mankind has pretty continuously grown in bulk through history” (1948 [1923]:297). Although he initially limits the idea of progress to the quantitative increase in cultural traits, he also introduces more far-reaching criteria: “...the quantitative expansion of the content of total human culture; the atrophy of magic based on psychopathology; the decline of infantile obsession with the outstanding psychological events of human life; and the persistent tendency of technology and science to grow accumulatively—these are the ways in which progress may legitimately be considered a property or attribute of culture” (ibid.:304). In later writings (1963b [1957]), he adds man’s increasing control over the environment to this original list of criteria. Apparently, Kroeber was never entirely free from the evolutionary biases that he fought so hard to combat. [1]

Culture growth involves a gradual, unpredictable accumulation of inventory. In addition to this process, Kroeber devoted much effort to the examination of long-range mechanisms through which cultural patterns and styles evolve. Patterns, for Kroeber, are “those arrangements or systems which give to any culture its coherence or plan, and keep it from being a mere accumulation of random bits.” He construes style as “a coherent, self-consistent way of expressing certain behavior and performing certain kinds of acts” (1963b [1957]:150). It involves specific methods, techniques, and plans of operation that are the result of choices made from among various alternative courses of action. These words, composed in 1936, resonate with those introduced two years before in Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*

(1934). Benedict's analysis, focused on remote, non-Western, small-scale societies, was entirely synchronic, virtually non-historical. By contrast, Kroeber applied the terms patterns and style to large-scale, complex cultures, even civilizations, and sought to define stylistic change over lengthy periods of time.

The major characteristic of stylistic change for Kroeber is its essential regularity or predictability, signaling widespread cultural alterations that transcend the actions of individuals. In terms of historical causality, it is the opposite of great man theories. Kroeber believed that styles are propelled in one direction or another by some unidentified internal force. Innovations in accordance with that force become adopted and thrive; those that move in a contrary direction are rejected. In his two famous analyses of dress design (1952:332-336, 258-372), carried out with Jane Richardson, Kroeber examines three hundred years of female fashion, and finds a kind of pendulum swing in dress styles, a regularity that flies in the face of seemingly chaotic fluctuations. With careful use of quantitative measurement, he finds that "the basic dimensions of European feminine dress alternate with fair regularity between maxima and minima which in most cases average about fifty years apart, so that the full wave length of their periodicity is about a century." (1952:332-336). Periods of sociopolitical unrest intensify or accelerate the rapidity of these stylistic changes. But, he continues, "the *how* of the unsettlement of dress style is *not* dictated by the sociopolitical conditions; that must be due to something in the set of fashions themselves—something within the structure of fashion, so to speak, at the time when the unsettling larger influences impinge on them" (1963b [1957]:19).

Similar reasoning drives Kroeber's analysis in *Configurations of Culture Growth* (1944), his massive treatment of intellectual and artistic development occurring in major civilizations, including China, India, Greece, Islam, and Western Europe. Within each of these major culture areas, he considers significant advances in philosophy, science, sculpture, painting, literature, and other examples of what he calls (in an implicitly evaluative vein) "high culture." Through meticulous quantitative and qualitative analysis, Kroeber demonstrates that each area of intellectual or artistic activity experiences a pulse-like growth, with major advances being concentrated within limited time spans. Associated with these bursts of growth are clusters of geniuses, those responsible for valuable intellectual and artistic productivity. Dismissing genetic factors as accountable for the irregular distribution of geniuses, Kroeber explains, "inasmuch as historically recognized geniuses do not ordinarily appear in an even flow, but in clusters separated by intervals, it is evident that cultural situations or influences must at times allow and at others inhibit the realization of genius" (1944:14). In other words, great men appear only when the cultures in which they operate allow original minds to attain permanent recognition and influence.

Ambitious as it is, *Configurations of Culture Growth* is nonetheless beset with methodological problems. Largely because of the unusually wide scope of material in the work, Kroeber is forced to rely almost completely on data gathered from encyclopedias and textbooks for identifying what constitutes high culture in each of the civilizations under examination. His

main justification for this approach rests on the “timidity” of these sources “about departing from the accepted norm” (1944:23). Yet we may question whether the “accepted norm” should be the final criterion of judgment on what constitutes outstanding achievement in knowledge and art. Historical norms, like all others, are bound to a particular place and time. They are in constant flux. Thus, a nineteenth-century textbook on the Middle Ages may very well reveal more about nineteenth-century ideas than about ideas in the Middle Ages. In addition to being time-bound, Kroeber’s sources are no doubt culture-bound. His bibliography reveals that, with very few exceptions, he has relied on Western sources alone, yielding a probable cultural bias in their portrayal of non-European peoples in particular.

In discussing pattern fluctuation through time—on both a small and large scale—Kroeber was fond of using short-cut organic metaphors. In his discourse, patterns become “infected,” styles “strain,” “move,” “freeze” (1948 [1923]:336). One of his most startling and frequent metaphors invokes death. Kroeber considers the problem of cultural death to be an integral part of the development of patterns and styles. He notes, first of all, that individual artistic and intellectual patterns disintegrate. They then become extinguished or die. More important, perhaps, he asks whether a particular whole-culture or total-culture can undergo the same process of death that characterizes particular limited elements of that culture. Pointing out that culture is a basic attribute of all human societies, and that no society could exist without some culture, he nonetheless believes that “specific cultures, that is, particular, geographically limited forms of culture can and do die. They die not only by complete extinction of the population which carry them”—such as occurred to the aboriginal Tasmanians—but by “absorption of societies into larger societies which have different cultures...” (1944: 819). However, he notes that we cannot determine whether a particular culture can die from internal cultural causes along, since “nature, so far as we know, has not performed the experiment” (ibid.: 820).

Kroeber’s writings personify culture by describing its temporal movement in terms like “halting,” “feeling about,” “exploring,” “prospecting,” and the like. He frequently applies the organic analogy by using concepts like “growth,” “death,” “fatigue,” and so on to the study of change. In Kroeber’s work, cultures grow, tire, and finally disappear. In several passages, Kroeber explicitly states that his use of personification and the organic analogy is strictly metaphorical, not to be taken literally. He claims to use this language when there are no better substitute terms. Despite this disclaimer, however, the relative frequency and freedom with which Kroeber employs such metaphors leaves him open to the criticism that he reifies culture, that he interprets culture as if it were an actual organic entity. A passage such as the following does nothing to undermine this charge:

“To be sure, that individuals must die is no proof that particular cultures must die. We can only say that it leaves room for that possibility to be true; and that, as long as we accept natural death in the organic world without really understanding it, we are not forced to deny cultural death because we cannot explain its processes” (1944:821).

Hence, even though Kroeber consistently reiterates the claim to be descriptive rather than explanatory, his use of metaphors and organic analogies injects an unintentional causal dimension into his descriptions. The metaphors, whatever their analytical purpose, evoke an image of culture as an entity with an internally coherent and autonomous existence, one that is moved and guided by forces contained within itself. Kroeber actually says that cultural products “maintain an existence of their own, which is associated with...groups of individuals, in fact is dependent upon them and yet the products have also a certain independence, in that they largely affect and modify one another” (1963b [1957]:75). Kroeber’s assertion that cultural products “affect” and “modify” one another is certainly an implied admission of causality. And in *Configurations of Culture Growth*, he admits that the ultimate force behind the periodicity of artistic and intellectual advances “may be something in the constitution of the human mind” (1944:763).

Despite Kroeber’s reiteration of his claim for his writings to be purely descriptive rather than explanatory, we may question whether any historical work can be descriptive alone. Historians, like other social scientists, choose to present readers with only some of the myriad facts that confront them. When these specially chosen facts are given meaning by showing that they are all interrelated and form elaborate patterns, some causal interpretation is inherent in the analysis itself. Even if causality is not the intention of an author, readers will search for causes anyway. Kroeber seems to sense this when he writes, “As long as we [anthropologists]...consistently show a negativistic attitude toward broader conclusions, the world will find very little of profit in ethnology. People do want to know why” (1920:380).

A telling passage gleaned from a footnote in one of the dress style articles reveals Kroeber’s underlying belief that culture change is not entirely driven by superorganic forces. In discussing how changes in dress styles express sociopolitical strains and periods of political unrest, Kroeber writes that “Literally, of course, it is the minds of the designers of dresses that are affected and show strains in their creations. But since such individuals tend to be affected and to react more or less alike, it is their common behavior, and the common drift of their products, that are historically most significant” (1948 [1923]:336). What is also significant is Kroeber’s placement of this revelation in a footnote. It was of utmost importance to him to assert the autonomy of the cultural realm, to mute the relation between cultural change and sociopolitical developments. Demonstrating the superorganic nature of culture advanced the establishment of anthropology as a new, productive field of study, a field deserving of all the privileges that a respected, thriving discipline might hope to acquire.

Overall, Kroeber’s treatment of culture change, however flawed and outmoded it seems today, was driven by one dominant goal: to establish the independence and perpetuity of American anthropology by laying its solid foundation on the culture concept. The notion of culture with a capital C was in his day unique to our discipline, and remains up to now associated with it. Kroeber’s enormous contributions to the field of culture change lay not

only in the vast quantity and range of data he supplied to his readers, but also in the extreme originality with which he analyzed and examined those data. Imperfect though some of his analyses appear in retrospect, he was able to bring to his material unparalleled timeliness and vitality. In that regard Kroeber certainly achieved success. Although impossible to prove, it is very likely that all American anthropologists in the twenty-first century owe at least a modicum of their professional salary and standing to his efforts.

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[1] We might view his statements of human growth as a simplified, condensed version of nineteenth-century social thought, as well as a foreshadowing of evolutionary theories (by Leslie White [2016], Marshall Sahlins [1960], among others), which became popular in anthropological discourse several decades later.