# EVOLUTION AND CULTURE

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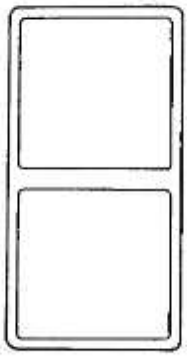

*by Leslie A. White*

## *Foreword*

"The theory of cultural evolution [is] to my mind the most inane, sterile, and pernicious theory in the whole theory of science . . ." These words, by Berthold Laufer, in a review praising Lowie's *Culture and Ethnology*, fairly well expressed the point of view of the Boas group which dominated much of American anthropology for decades. Twenty-three years later, Melville J. Herskovits was "glad to affirm his belief" in an antievolutionist position (1941). And, I am told, the antievolutionist philosophy of the Boas group is still being taught in many departments of anthropology in the United States.

The repudiation of evolutionism in the United States is not easily explained. Many nonanthropological scientists find it incredible that a man who has been hailed as "the world's greatest anthropologist" (Kroeber, 1943). namely, Franz Boas, a man who was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, should have devoted himself assiduously and with vigor for decades to this antiscientific and reactionary pursuit. But it is not our purpose to attempt an explanation of this phenomenon here.

It is apparent, of course, that the foes of evolutionist theory were not liquidated with the triumph of Darwin-

ism in the later decades of the nineteenth century; they were merely routed for the time being and eventually regrouped their forces for a counterattack. It may be significant to also note that evolutionism flourished in cultural anthropology in a day when the capitalist system was still growing: evolution and progress were the order of the day. But when, at the close of the nineteenth century the era of colonial expansion came to an end and the capitalist-democratic system had matured and established itself securely in the Western world, then evolution was no longer a popular concept. On the contrary, the dominant note was "maintain the status quo." And, although the United States was born in armed revolt against its mother country, in mid-twentieth century it is determined that no other country shall do likewise, and the communist revolution which is spreading throughout much of the world is always called "aggression," and is opposed on moral grounds as well as with economic and military means.

As far as Boas was concerned, we would be the last to point to him as the *cause* of the antievolutionist movement in American anthropology; he was but the energetic instrument and effective catalyst of this general trend in society and ideology. As a matter of fact, one can find opposition to evolutionism on native American soil and among native-born Americans, in contrast with the German-born Boas and the largely European provenience of the prominent members of the Boas group. William James, for example, declared that "the evolutionary view of history, when it denies the vital importance of individual initiative, is, then, an utterly vague and unscientific conception, a lapse from modern scientific determinism into the most ancient oriental fatalism" (1880: 455). He also asserted that "the 'philosophy' of

evolution. . . . is a metaphysical creed, and nothing else. It is a mood of contemplation, an emotional attitude, rather than a system of thought, a mood which is old as the world, and which no refutation of any one incarnation of it (such as the Spencerian philosophy) will dispell; the mood of fatalistic pantheism . . ." (*ibid.*: 458).

The case of William Jennings Bryan and the Tennessee hillbillies in the Scopes trial provides another example of native American antievolutionism outside the orbit of the Boas group.

But antievolutionism has run its course and once more the theory of evolution is on the march. Again, it may be significant to note that this is taking place in a world which is once more undergoing rapid and profound change. The so-called backward nations in Africa and Asia are rebelling against the white man and colonialism. The social organization of the whole world is undergoing profound change or is faced with this very real possibility. The status quo is fostered precariously by a nation that has assumed "world leadership."

The return to evolutionism was, of course, inevitable if progress was to continue in science and if science was to embrace cultural anthropology. The concept of evolution has proved itself to be too fundamental and fruitful to be ignored indefinitely by anything calling itself a science. Evolutionism was therefore bound to return to cultural anthropology sooner or later. The essays which follow indicate the extent to which this return has already been effected.

In addition to trends in our social and political life with their ideological repercussions, the return of evolutionism to cultural anthropology is being fostered by the Darwin Centennial. So many celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of *The Origin of Species* and the participa-

tion of so many distinguished scholars in these celebrations cannot but affect the cultural anthropologists of the United States. In comparison with the generation of McLennan, Maine, and Morgan, which placed principles above harmony and popularity, many anthropologists of today are peculiarly sensible to the opinions and regard of others; they want to be both respectable and well-liked by their fellows. We may safely predict that evolutionism in cultural anthropology will become respectable and even popular in the future. As a matter of fact, we may expect to see more than one anthropologist come forward and tell us that he has actually been an evolutionist all along. And many a would-be evolutionist will turn out to be merely a culture historian who notices similarities ("regularities") between two or more regions, or even likenesses of cause and effect in the reaction of natives to white traders (Steward, 1955, 1956). The fact that history will be mistaken for evolution, just as in the past evolution has been mistaken for history, will probably do little to dampen a new-found enthusiasm for evolutionism. But we have little to fear on this score and in the long run, however. The basic character of the concept of evolution and the sturdy and stable techniques of science will win out eventually.

Turning to the essays themselves, Sahlins' distinction between specific and general evolution should do much to clear up once and for all the long-standing confusion between history and evolution. Because an account of the evolution of a particular culture has been both chronological and specific, it has been called history. And general evolution has been termed by Kroeber "summarized history" or "merely large histories." But specific evolution is not history, an account of events that are related merely temporally and spatially. Specific evolution is still a chron-

ological sequence of forms that are functionally interrelated: one form gives rise to another. Even though confined to a single phylogenetic line, specific evolution is still a temporal generalizing process, whereas history consists of temporal particularizing processes.

And general evolution is, if anything, even farther removed from history than specific evolution. History is not the name of any and all kinds of temporal processes, or an account thereof. Evolution is a temporal process also, but of a different kind. Sahlins' distinction between specific and general evolution should help to make it apparent that it is the former that has often been called, and miscalled, history; should help to make it clear that specific evolution is just as much evolution as general evolution. And Sahlins' treatment of general evolution should also make it apparent that an account of the evolution of world culture, or the evolution of technology, is not at all the same kind of thing as a historical account of the Thirty Years' War, or any other "large history."

Sahlins' distinction between specific and general evolution should also help to end the inane debate about unilinear (or universal) evolution *vs* multilinear evolution. No one, so far as we know, has ever maintained that the only kind of evolution in culture was unilinear. But we have some who argue that the only kind of valid, or meaningful, evolutionism is multilinear (Steward, 1955; Birdsell, 1957). As Sahlins makes perfectly clear, evolution in its specific (phylogenetic) aspect is multilinear; evolution in its general aspect is unilinear. This distinction between the two different, but complementary and inseparable, aspects of evolution—the unilinear and multilinear—has never been made clearer than in Sahlins' presentation. And Sahlins makes it quite clear, too, that general evolution is far from being "so obvious as to be

useless." On the contrary, the theory of general evolution throws a flood of light upon both whole and parts; offers an insight and an understanding that can be obtained in no other way.

It is not our purpose, nor is it our proper task, to summarize each of the chapters in this volume; each essay will speak adequately for itself and each reader will read it for himself. We may observe, however, that Harding's paper shows in an illuminating and convincing manner how the process of specific evolution may be creative in some respects but conservative in others: as the adaptive process proceeds new things are developed; but after adaptation has been achieved the emphasis is upon the status quo. In "The Law of Cultural Dominance," Kaplan distinguishes between specific dominance and general dominance. In the former, a culture, or culture type, entrenches itself in a particular environment through intensive adaptation; it persists as the type that can most effectively exploit that environment. In the case of general dominance, a type of culture is developed that has greater adaptability to a wide range of environments and a superior ability to exploit their resources. He defines The Law of Cultural Dominance in thermodynamic terms.

In his brilliant essay, "The Law of Evolutionary Potential," Service shows how this principle throws light upon and renders intelligible many anthropological problems that have remained obscure or misunderstood for a long time. His application of this law to "The Present and Future of America" is original, revealing, and positively exciting. It would do the author an injustice and the reader a disservice for me to attempt a digest or paraphrase of this part or of the whole.

Common features or characteristics of the essays are: