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978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Excerpt

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Introduction

The essays of Alexander Lesser are critical documents in the history of American anthropology. In his teaching and research, Lesser specialized in the study of North American Indians, above all the cultures of those groups referred to in the anthropological literature as “Plains Indians.” In addition, Lesser devoted many years of his professional life to the cause of American Indians. By combining teaching, research, and policy activity on, for, and with American Indians during the course of his career, he distinguished himself among the anthropologists of his generation.

Lesser mentions John Dewey and Alexander Goldenweiser as among the major figures in his intellectual development. But it was Franz Boas who had the most profound effect. In the 1920s, Lesser was one of the “second wave” of Boas students at Columbia University that also included George Herzog, Melville Jacobs, and Gene Weltfish (to whom Lesser was married for many years). Boas was then at the height of a career that embodied one of the most powerful (and, in the United States, one of the most disturbing) traditions in the whole history of social science, a tradition that Lesser and many others have helped to reveal and recall. (See, for instance, American Anthropological Association 1943, Goldschmidt 1949, Stocking 1974, Lesser 1968a, and Part I of this volume.)

Lesser’s intellectual accomplishments bespeak Boas’s influence in manifold ways. Yet, as the essays reprinted in this volume attest, he went beyond “Boasianism.” The further development of Boas’s anthropology was hampered by the kinds of general – one might almost say philosophical – stands he was compelled to take, given the political and social climate of his adopted homeland, the United States. Lesser’s ability to break away from the constraints that bound his teacher marked his distinctive contribution to anthropology. His scholarship reveals not only how he labored to remain loyal to the viewpoint of his teacher, but also the brilliance of his insight when he succeeded in going further in certain important theoretical directions than Boas was prepared to go.

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Any regrouping of essays that have been chosen from different periods of an individual's intellectual development is by definition arbitrary and does some violence to the chronological continuity of theoretical effort. The arrangement of this volume is no exception. The articles have been grouped into four sections, each with an introduction aimed at helping the reader appreciate Lesser's contribution in four distinguishable domains of anthropology. The first section, "Boasian anthropology," suggests both what Lesser learned from Boas and how he went beyond him. The second section, "Theory and method," is separable from the third, "Evolution," only by a kind of Alexandrine decision, for both sections deal with theory, and the essays in "Theory and method" are also related to Lesser's evolutionary perspective. The essays in the last section, "Anthropology and modern life," express Lesser's lifelong interest in North American Indians as well as his concern about the applicability of anthropology to human needs.

There is an unusual intellectual continuity and consistency in Lesser's writings, from his first published paper to the last. "Caddoan kinship systems," published in 1979, was based on materials gathered half a century earlier, but it is no less focused, and reveals no significantly different theoretical stance, than the first essay he wrote on Caddoan groups (1929a). There was, however, a long period during which Lesser published very little. The fit of his periods of greater productivity with world events is clear, for his scholarly work is in effect concentrated in two periods: the first the years just after he finished his dissertation in 1929; the second near the end of his career.

The theoretical high point of Lesser's work falls in the years 1933–39. Before the war, he taught at Columbia University, Brooklyn College, and elsewhere, counting among his students such leaders of anthropology as Joseph Greenberg, Oscar Lewis, and Charles Wagley. Many of the students who accompanied him on the Kiowa Field Training Expedition in 1935, including William Bascom, Donald Collier, and Weston La Barre, also eventually had an important influence on American anthropology. Some of them, like Bernard Mishkin and Jane Richardson Hanks, wrote dissertations based on the experience. Lesser's article and monograph on the Ghost Dance (see Chapters 8 and 9) appeared in 1933, and "Functionalism in social anthropology" (Chapter 3) in 1935. These three works, though very different in substance, are related through Lesser's concern with history as a tool for the explanation of social and cultural change. Two of his finest papers, on procedures and directives in anthropological research (Chapters 2 and 4), were published in 1939, and show Lesser actively doubting the received wisdom of the whole profession. His best-

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known paper on evolution (Chapter 5), almost a taboo topic at the time, was presented at a professional meeting the same year (though it was not published until 1952).

Like many others of the time, Lesser's career was deeply affected by the Second World War. The war period interrupted his teaching and research for longer than he had expected. In 1943, he began his government service in the Office of the Coordinator for Interamerican Affairs. He was transferred the following year to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). In 1946, when the OSS closed up shop, he was awarded a Certificate of Merit. He then became a research analyst with the Latin America Branch of the U.S. State Department's Office of Research Intelligence, where he remained until 1947. Because he was unable to get a teaching post, from government service Lesser went to the Association on American Indian Affairs, where he served as Executive Director for eight years, until 1955. During the period from 1947 to 1955 he published numerous articles and (in his role as editor of *The American Indian*) editorials dealing with policy matters concerning American Indians, but wrote little of a theoretical nature. There is no doubt that more of Lesser's work would have been published eventually, had it not been for the war years and for his lengthy stay at the Association while he was unable to obtain a teaching position.

It was only in 1956, after a hiatus of thirteen years, that Lesser was able to return to teaching, first at Brandeis University and thereafter at Hofstra. His second period of scholarly productivity came after he had returned to full-time teaching. In 1961, he published an important paper on the position of the American Indian (Chapter 7) and a perceptive essay on social fields (Chapter 6). He contributed a new foreword (Chapter 9) to the paperback edition of *The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game* in 1978, and in 1981 prepared his lengthy essay on Franz Boas (Chapter 1) for publication. Chapter 10 is a previously unpublished paper he delivered as a Distinguished Lecture at Calgary University in 1974.

Lesser's contributions toward a unified social science and an anthropology with policy implications are as important as his contributions to descriptive ethnography and "pure science." His stress upon the inter-relatedness and orderliness of social phenomena, his belief in a genuinely scientific anthropology, his insistence on an anthropology that could produce practical insights for solving human problems, his use of conceptual materials to enhance the explanatory value of field data – all allowed him to rise above ethnographic particularism and to shatter conventional notions of what cultural anthropology was thought to be half a century ago.

Lesser's admiration for Boas was matched by his own desire to make anthropology relevant to the solution of the everyday problems of ordi-

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nary people. His view of Boas as citizen-scientist clearly expressed his own feelings about the aims and worthwhileness of his discipline (see Chapter 1). Those who knew Lesser from his performances at scholarly meetings will remember his unusual ability to find the larger inconsistencies in “schools” of anthropological thought, address them from the floor, and expose them concisely. At the 1959 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society (AES), to note but one instance, he attacked the idea of the “intermediate society” so effectively that the architect of the concept asked him to contribute a piece to the proceedings (see Lesser 1959). The ideas in that short AES essay are represented in this collection in “Social fields and the evolution of society” (Chapter 6).

His ideas on war surface nowhere in this book, but in an essay *The New York Times* commissioned in 1968 (but never printed), Lesser underlined his conviction that war, like most massive contemporary problems, is a problem that must be addressed by the social sciences:

It is not atomic energy that is the terror of the atomic age, but the *social and political relationships* among peoples which threaten nuclear war. Atoms for peace rather than war is a problem of behavioral relationships, not of physics. All the fundamental problems of our time are problems of human relationships, not technology. . . . Peace is not even understood positively – it is for most, scientists and laymen alike, the absence of war. Most of the “peace” in the world, like the “peace” in the Near East, or the “Cold War” of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., is merely an “armed truce,” with fingers steadily fingering the “buttons” and the triggers.

What does social science *know* about war? In 1945, under the leadership of Gardner Murphy, American psychologists published a symposium on *Human Nature and Enduring Peace*, and the first principle to which all subscribed is: War can be avoided; war is not born in men; it is built into men. Anthropologists have shown that many cultures and societies have existed *without war* so that war and militarism are not inherent in the nature of human society. Psychology and anthropology concur that “instincts” are not involved in adult human behavior, and that aggression is not innate in man. The current crop of pseudo-science (by non-social scientists) trying to prove the opposite is rationalization of our national and international commitment to war as a normal feature of human political life. Even on an individual basis, aggression is patently not innate. . . . Obviously, we *assume* aggression is there in the baby – all babies – and got “sublimated” out of some. This is not science, but fairy tales.

In “War and the state” (1968b), Lesser carries his argument further, pointing out that armed conflict takes radically different forms in societies having different technical bases, different economies, and different sizes. He draws on his own extensive knowledge of Plains Indian warfare, and emphasizes the examination of reliable data on the fighting behavior of

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particular peoples. Though he criticizes “disembodied fantasies of theory,” Lesser is not calling for an end to theory – far from it. Rather, he is insisting on the need to relate theory and facts, a need anthropologists clearly benefit from being reminded of at regular intervals. Moreover, he is arguing that anthropologists have something important to say about a subject matter they have usually ignored, leaving it to other scholars to settle.

It was because of his commitment to a holistic view of culture that was “functional” as well as “historical” that Lesser was as impatient with much of the so-called history of many American anthropologists as he was with much of the so-called functionalism of many British anthropologists. A functionalism that found no room for the effects of European conquest upon the indigenous institutions of the conquered peoples struck him as odd indeed – though his skepticism was shared by a surprisingly small number of his colleagues in the United States. And a historicism that counted in infinite detail the items of material culture in an indigenous society, in order to repeat the process with dozens of neighboring societies and then to attempt to reconstruct their “history” statistically, struck him as equally odd.

In melding so convincingly functionalism and historical method in his own work, Lesser avoided the sterility of both distributional studies and ahistorical functionalism. Only a few anthropologists of his time paid attention. A genuine functional historicity has only recently reemerged – at times with somewhat startling fanfare about pioneering this or that. Lesser was a prophet for his own profession. But prophets are always ahead of their time.

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Part I

Boasian anthropology

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Introduction to Part I

The two essays in this section are different in kind and were written at significantly different points in Lesser's career, yet they clearly belong together. The first, "Franz Boas and the modernization of anthropology," was delivered as a lecture at several universities in the 1970s, before it was prepared for publication. Its appearance in 1981 in a collection edited by Sydel Silverman followed by thirteen years another essay Lesser had written on Boas, for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, that documented Boas's scientific accomplishments (Lesser 1968a). The 1981 essay is concerned as much with Boas as a public and political figure as with his scientific position and achievements. In the ways that he interpreted Boas's work and his scientific stance, one can readily discern where Lesser learned many of his own habits of mind about the objectives of anthropology, if it is to be used in the service of humanity.

The second essay, "Research procedure and the laws of culture," was written in 1939, during the most productive period of Lesser's scholarly life. It belongs with the paper on Boas because it reveals to the reader the powerful intellectual stimuli (and one supposes, equally powerful constraints) that Lesser must have experienced as Boas's student. If viewed from the perspective of Lesser's theoretical development, however, it could just as well have been included in Part III.

From 1896 until 1936, when he retired, Franz Boas represented anthropology at Columbia University. Silverman (1981:2–3) has pointed out that Boas produced two generations of anthropologists during his lifetime, each of which in turn produced yet others influenced by the same fundamental ideas. For many American anthropologists, though emphatically not for all, Boas's views became almost synonymous with the discipline of anthropology.

In an essay that throws much light on Boas and his students, Eric Wolf has distinguished three stages in the intellectual history of American anthropology. The second stage, which he calls "the period of intermittent

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Liberal Reform,” dates from near the end of the last century to the Second World War and corresponds to the Boas era:

The assertion of a collectivity of common men against the anarchistic captains of industry was represented by Beard, Turner, Veblen, Commons, Dewey, Brandeis, and Holmes; in American anthropology, the reaction against Social Darwinism found its main spokesman in Franz Boas. His work in physical anthropology furnished some of the initial arguments against a racism linked to Social Darwinist arguments. In his historical particularism he validated a shift of interest away from the grand evolutionary schemes to concern with the panoply of particular cultures in their historically conditioned setting. If we relate these anthropological interests to the tenor of the times, we can say that the renewed interest in cultural plurality and relativity had two major functions. It called into question the moral and political monopoly of an elite which had justified its rule with the claim that their superior virtue was the outcome of the evolutionary process – it was their might which made their right. . . . For the intellectual prophets of the times the preeminent instruments for the achievement of this cooperative participation among new and diverse elements were to be scientific education and liberal reform achieved through social engineering. . . . The tool for discovery of the manifold educational processes – and hence also for a more adequate approach to the engineering of pluralistic education – was science, that is, anthropology. The faith in social engineering and in the possibility of a new educational pluralism also underwrote the action programs among American Indians, who by means of the new techniques were to become autonomous participants in a more pluralistic and tolerant America.

But . . . the anthropology of Liberal Reform did not address itself, in any substantive way, to the problem of power . . . only rarely – if at all – did anthropologists shift their scientific focus to the constraints impeding both human malleability and malleability in socialization from the outside. . . . The culture-and-personality schools of the 30’s and 40’s made a moral paradigm of each individual culture. They spoke of patterns, themes, world view, ethos, and values, but not of power. . . . Neither in the 19th century nor in the first half of the 20th century, therefore, did American anthropology as such come to grips with the phenomenon of power (Wolf 1969:5–7).

It is quite true that Boas did not pay close attention to the concept of power in his analyses, or use power as an explanatory device in his own research – in his work on non-Western societies, the issues of power and class are relatively neglected. But as Lesser’s essay on Boas (Chapter 1) demonstrates, that he was nonetheless aware of power and its uses is clear from his outspokenness on many public issues, and from the consequences of some of his most unpopular stands, such as his opposition to American participation in the First World War.

By leaving unaddressed the possibility that class divisions might be found in all societies, Boas left room for the idea that, rather than being linked to the history of particular social institutions – property, law, forms

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of marriage, religious systems – class might instead constitute some universal natural attribute of human society. In his famous book on social classes, the economist and economic historian Joseph Schumpeter, a colleague of Boas's before the First World War, wrote that “neither historically nor ethnologically has its [class's] utter absence been demonstrated in even a single case” (Schumpeter 1955:112). Schumpeter cites Gumpowicz, Marx, Sombart, and Haddon in support of one or another part of his argument; yet he makes not a single mention of Boas, pro or con. But though Boas's position on this issue was unclear, his work was crucial to the views of other scholars, who saw in the concept of culture a powerful instrument for understanding both social status and social change. John Dewey was one of them. In the essay on human nature Lesser quotes near the end of Chapter 1, Dewey observes that “many of the obstacles to change which have been attributed to human nature are in fact due to the inertia of institutions and to the voluntary desire of powerful classes to maintain the existing status” (Dewey 1932:536). Even though Boas did not (to my knowledge) ever state such views so succinctly, the link between his position and Dewey's is clear.

What has doubtless been perceived as the more enduringly subversive idea within “Boasianism” is Boas's commitment to a *science* of humankind and what that implied for United States society as it was constituted during the first half of this century. In effect, Boas argued for an objective and value-free approach to the comparative study of all cultures, especially those of technically less advanced peoples. He was never prepared to assume that any differences in intellectual capacity or in moral worth obtained between one society or human group and any other. He created, largely by his own research, a physical anthropology that lent no support to preconceptions about the significance of physical differences between or among human groups. He argued eloquently and convincingly for the separation of race, a genetic concept, from language and culture, which are socially acquired and historically derived accompaniments to human group existence. Though his anthropology was concentrated on so-called primitive peoples, particularly American Indians, he carried out investigations (and supported his students' research) among European immigrants, Africans, Puerto Ricans, and Black Americans; in Melanesia and Polynesia; and on the Jesup Expedition to Siberia. His work was consistently initiated on the premise that culture is a distinctively human property that is shared equally by all human beings.

It is only in the light of what Wolf calls “the tenor of the times” that the implications of Boasian anthropology and its scientific contentions about human nature can be seen for what they were. During the period

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1890–1920, the complete undoing of Reconstruction was being celebrated and a reign of terror against Black Americans was becoming institutionalized, vast masses of penniless and uneducated European immigrants were arriving in the United States, and the military elimination of American Indians as a political force looked at last to be fully assured. If we then add to this picture that Boas was a German-Jewish immigrant who lived in New York City, taught at Columbia University, and had many Jewish, foreign, and female students, we should not be surprised that he is reviled to this day, more than forty years after his death, by racists, sexists, anti-Semites, xenophobes, and chauvinists. And his achievements – that he was honored around the world for his scholarship, that his scientific integrity was never impugned by other scholars, that his reorganization of American anthropology affected the discipline nearly everywhere, and that he succeeded in finding support for his students in spite of his outspokenness on pressing public issues – are all the more cause for wonder.

In the first essay of Part I, Lesser seeks to situate Franz Boas, both as a scientific pioneer in anthropology and as a political figure of his time. But in the second, he undertakes a more difficult task: to establish Boas as a social evolutionist. Lesser seeks to document regularities or casual sequences in culture and offers a series of examples, some of regularly interdependent (or functional) relationships and others of patterned sequences (historical or diachronic regularities). He draws heavily on Boas's own work in his attempt to refute assertions that Boas had no interest in causation, in social (as opposed to biological) evolution, or in social and cultural regularities. Oddly enough – though he did not recognize it until others later made it clear – the more convincing portions of the argument are Lesser's. But some of his own originality is diminished by the way in which he argues, for though it is somewhat anticipatory to make the assertion here, Lesser is caught up in this essay by his desire to go beyond the anthropology of his teacher without appearing to differ with him.

If Boas was antievolutionary – as I believe him to have been – his antievolutionism was actually rooted in two quite different concerns. He was, of course, an organic (Darwinian) evolutionist. But his lack of enthusiasm for social or cultural evolutionary theory originated, I believe, not only in the state of anthropological theory at the turn of the century, but also in the strategic importance of the spurious evolutionism evident in American political and economic thought of the times.

Boas had little interest in broad causative generalities about humankind or its history, believing that many detailed ethnographic studies would