

On The Origins Of Modern Theoretical Anthropology

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In a forthcoming book, *In Search of the Primitive* (Basic Books), I attempt to interpret the history and role of anthropology in some detail; here, I simply wish to state that Stocking's article (AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST 65: 783-99) on the dual significance, and nominal origin, of the concept of culture is persuasive and sound. However, I take it that he is not implying that the central, and conflicting, themes of modern theoretical anthropology were formulated in England in the latter half of the 19th century. They were, of course, conceived across the Channel, a century earlier, during the French Enlightenment, that axial age of the modern consciousness, which Stocking mentions only once – and then relative to Tylor. The West European Enlightenment, which had its antecedents (the Renaissance, the Reformation) was, nevertheless, the initiation period of a materialist, secular, and technical world order, of which corporate Capitalism and modern Communism are variants, and which may yet turn out to realize itself in the first truly ecumenical society in the history of civilization. The philosophy of the Enlightenment was split, particularly in France, by a paradox. On the one hand, the possibility of a continued evolutionary thrust into the future, an empirically derived, rational and logical periodization of the laws of nature and society, and the revelation of a New Man, freed from all past superstition and prejudice, were visualized by Condorcet, Diderot, indeed, most of the Encyclopedists. This view was reinforced by the new techniques that seemed to be at hand for the control of the natural environment and was rooted, also, in the possibility of a new science conceived in Newton, Bacon, and Locke, the English forerunners of the Enlightenment.

On the other hand, the nascent modern realities that were being spawned by the revolutionary bourgeoisie, e.g., the new urbanism, the new acquisitiveness, the early manufactories, had already begun to exert their alienating effect on several seminal figures, most notably Rousseau. Even before the French Revolution occurred, intellectual doubts of a very profound type had been expressed about the state to which the then contemporary world was

tending. In that sense, the revolution itself was already an anti-climax for those intellectuals who had begun to think through and beyond it. Unlike the “emergent masses,” these intellectuals (Kierkegaard and Ortega are among their descendants) were bored, even chilled, by the new realities that were to become the catchwords and goals of future revolutions.

Modern anthropology built itself on the horns of this modern dilemma. The contradiction between the progressive, evolutionary view, and the holistic “natural” view was generated by the Enlightenment, and the “twin anthropological cultures[”] were born. That is to say, the Enlightenment produced its own alienated critics. Consequently, some of them became increasingly curious about the contrasting character of native peoples who had begun to be reported on in the immediately preceding great Age of discovery, and this gave modern anthropology both its orientation in field work and a certain set of attitudes. Thus, our modern theoretical discipline has inherited the materialist, evolutionist, secular, scientific and more or less melioristic spirit of the Enlightenment (Tylor), along with a Rousseauian distrust of civilization and the subsequent search for a more deeply expressive, primitive, permanent, human nature and cultural structure – one of the more influential, if less impressive variants of which proved to be German cultural-historical romanticism. Flesh and blood anthropologists, of course, are not necessarily confined to either one of their two conflicting but related, that is, ambivalent intellectual traditions, and most somehow manage to combine both, without significant resolution, in their attitudes, and, to a lesser degree, in their work. But relatively pure types are encountered. Leslie White would be representative of one tradition; Robert Redfield and Paul Radin of the other. Morgan and the classic Marxists, it should be noted, tried to resolve the conflict historically by prophesying a future in which the State apparatus would wither away, and the new technology would be wedded to the principles, not the forms, of the primitive commune, thus looking backward with Rousseau and forward with Condorcet and company.

This contradiction between what may be termed the two anthropological cultures is what Stocking has happily documented in the nominal problem concerning the meaning of the term “culture” in late 19th century England. The Tylor-Arnold schism is both a theoretical polarity derived from the Enlightenment and a parallel development resulting from similar reflections in similar conditions.