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### "Primitive" Cultures, Disciplinary Boundaries and Acculturation Studies in the American Anthropologist, C. 1935: Melville Herskovits, Leslie Spier and 'the Schapera Affair'

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Leslie Spier

Melville Jean Herskovits

## CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

### 'Primitive' Cultures, Disciplinary Boundaries and Acculturation Studies in the American Anthropologist, c. 1935: Melville Herskovits, Leslie Spier and 'The Schapera Affair'

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The ascendance of acculturation studies during the late interwar period signified an expansion of the anthropological subject and a refocusing of disciplinary identity. American anthropologists could not easily overlook the continuous first hand contacts between cultures that was transforming them the world over. Invasion, migration and the rise of mass communications brought about interpenetrations of cultures on a global scale unprecedented in world history. Few preindustrial societies remained untouched by colonialism. Taking stock of a growing body of ethnographic accounts of acculturation, the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Acculturation delineated research problems and methodological approaches. In its programmatic "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation," published simultaneously in five journals, the Committee suggested an agenda for acculturation scholarship which incorporated several currents of anthropological thought. To the present-day reader of the "Memorandum" it seems as if any human culture in contact with another had become a fit subject for anthropological acculturation scholarship. At the time, however, there were traditionalists within anthropology who resisted the rising tide of interest in acculturation. Among them was Leslie Spier, the editor of the American Anthropologist, who rejected an article on acculturation among the Bakxatla written by Isaac Schapera and submitted on his behalf by Melville J. Herskovits. A heated encounter between Spier and Herskovits placed in sharp focus critical issues of disciplinarity, the relevance of acculturation studies to anthropology and the validity of the study of cultural contact involving complex societies as an anthropological enterprise.

"Acculturation Among the Bakxatla of South Africa" impressed the members of the Committee on Acculturation when it was submitted as one of several analyses of acculturation situations the Committee had solicited in the spring of 1935. When Schapera submitted the paper, he asked if Herskovits could either publish it in the Committee's report or submit it to an American journal (NUHP: IS/MJH 6/6/35). Responding on the Committee's behalf, Herskovits indicated to Schapera that they were delaying publication of a final report because they had discovered that the field of acculturation studies "is quite a bit larger than we had expected." He therefore offered to submit it to the American Anthropologist, suggesting that it might be published in two installments because of its length (NUHP: MJH/IS 7/9/35). In response, Schapera asked Herskovits to try to have it considered as a Memoir of the American Anthropologist (NUHP: IS/MJH 10/18/35).

Spier, however, refused to go along, and in a letter of rejection written directly to Schapera he stated categorically that he viewed such an acculturation study as outside of the purview of anthropological scholarship:

I have read the paper with interest and feel that of its kind it is excellent and clearly presented. There are two considerations, however, which make it unsuitable for inclusion in the American Anthropologist and I am accordingly sending it back to you under separate cover.

The first is the matter of length. I estimate it would occupy 32 printed pages. It is out of the question for the Anthropologist to print long articles (unless special provision is made for them) since we have available for articles only about 110 pages in each issue. If your manuscript were to be considered for the Memoir series, there would arise the matter of financing. The Association set aside a relatively small sum for the printing of Memoirs with the understanding that the authors would be asked to find about half the sum needed in each case. Your paper, if printed as a Memoir, would cost roughly \$125. Naturally, I would need to know your wishes before considering it for a Memoir.

But there is another and more important consideration. It seems to me that such a study as yours - admirably presented though it is - treats of a subject which is not ordinarily considered their concern by anthropologists in this country. It would be an impertinence if I were to imply that you were to be guided by this consideration--but I am. As editor I have to bear in mind where the center of interest lies for the majority of my colleagues here. It seems to me that in general their concern is with cultures and culture change on the purely aboriginal level; that where they have to deal with cultures no longer wholly primitive, they are concerned to separate out those aspects which belong to that level; that questions of the integration of aboriginal cultures with our own had best be left to the sociologists. It may not be true in South Africa or in England, but in this country there has long been a practical division of labor between sociologists and anthropologists. The theoretical reasons for this differentiation of subjects may not be too substantial, but there are sound practical reasons. I think most of us hold that present day life on native reserves is part of the picture of our own society in its manifold phrasings, and as such, by our traditional division of effort, not our especial concern. I think further that we are interested in conserving our efforts and funds, small as they are, for the investigation of cultures historically unconnected with our own--for if we do not give our attention to this, who will?

Please do not misunderstand me; I am not lecturing you. But I respect your intelligence too much not to write frankly what is in my mind.

(NUHP: LS/IS 2/26/36).

This response enraged Herskovits on several counts. Ever aggressive in defense of his academic positions and sensitive to perceived affronts, he took umbrage at Spier's having communicated with Schapera without first contacting him, since he had submitted the article on Schapera's behalf. For Herskovits, acculturation scholarship lay in the center rather than the periphery of contemporary anthropological interests. Like most of the other acknowledged leaders of the discipline, he saw himself as Boasian--as indeed did Spier. But in contrast to

Spier's narrow construction of the boundaries of anthropology, Herskovits took an expansive view, contending that anthropology was distinguished from sociology by approach and method as much as by subject. After an opening statement of personal outrage, he proceeded to more substantive matters:

I had to read the copy of your letter to Schapera twice before I could bring myself to realize that it had actually been written to him. I can understand a possible annoyance with me for having asked you to consider a paper on acculturation, apparently a tabooed subject. But it is difficult for me to understand why you should have taken the occasion to express yourself directly to him as you did. From a purely personal point of view I cannot tell you in what an embarrassing position your letter has placed me. It was I who invited Schapera to write this paper for our Committee; it was I and not he who submitted it to you. If the paper was too long to be taken care of in the Anthropologist, that is another matter entirely in your hands. But when I asked you to let him have your editorial comments, I could not have been expected to imagine that they would have taken the form of an obiter dictum, delivered to a competent anthropologist in another country, concerning what constitutes proper material for anthropological research and publication here.

I must register vigorous disagreement with you not only as to the question of whether acculturation is a competent problem for anthropologists to study, but also as to your estimate concerning the place of acculturation in the interests of American anthropologists. I do not believe that Boas, Sapir, Wissler, Cooper, Benedict, Cole, Hallowell--to name but a few of us and not to include Redfield, Linton and myself--regard the problem of acculturation as outside the proper interests of anthropologists. In any event, it seems to me that if you had wished to indicate your stand, the time to have done this would have been when our acculturation memorandum was before you and not in the case of Schapera's paper.

I was particularly struck by your assertion that the study of culture-contact between European and primitive groups belongs to the sociologists. May I ask just what sociologists are occupied with the study of acculturation? As I see it, the difference between sociology and anthropology is the difference in techniques as well as data. Anthropological method is what has made it possible for us to study primitive peoples, wherever they are found, and in whatever condition; while the methods and interests of sociology, as I see them, essentially concern what may be spoken of as the social organization of our own civilization. Certainly, the difference between anthropology and sociology is more than the difference between a loin cloth and a pair of trousers. (NUHP: MJH/LS 3/5/36)

This contestation of disciplinary boundaries by Spier and Herskovits occurred at a time of heightened interdisciplinarity for anthropology (cf. Stocking 1976:10-13). Spier may have longed for a lost (or vanishing) disciplinary unity in which the study of tribal societies viewed as relative isolates facilitated greater intellectual coherence. In contrast, a central problematic

of Herskovits' own scholarship involved the consequences of cultural contacts between European and African cultures for the retention and transformation of African cultural elements in the Americas (cf. Jackson 1986). He practiced an anthropology which embodied multiple influences from different disciplines. In an essay he had recently published on "The Social History of the Negro," and a manuscript he was preparing on Life in a Haitian Valley, Herskovits incorporated ethnohistorical studies of the encounters of colonizers and white settlers with slaves, analysis of the impact of acculturative contact on personality, and assessment of the differential effects of acculturation upon different social institutions.

Initially, Herskovits reacted to Spier's rejection of Schapera's article by submitting his resignation as Associate Editor of the American Anthropologist. But Spier, and the Association's secretary John M. Cooper, writing on behalf of its president, Herbert Spinden, persuaded him to suspend his resignation until the annual meeting December. If the Association decided then that acculturation studies "are within the sphere of our interests" and papers on the topic could be published in AA, Herskovits would continue as Associate Editor (NUHP: MJH/JMC 3/5/36, 3/16/36). In this context, he took up the cudgels for acculturation studies, developing further arguments for how they might integrate seemingly divergent anthropological paradigms.

Writing to John Swanton, he described the paper on "The Significance of the Study of Acculturation for Anthropology" which he planned to deliver at the 1936 Association meetings. In it, he would argue that acculturation studies, by reconciling different conceptual approaches, were in fact perfectly suited for a time of marked theoretical pluralism in anthropology:

I am afraid that it will not be possible for me to complete writing the paper until just before the time for the meetings, since I have been and continue to be so busy with a book on Haiti that it will be a couple of weeks before I can get at the paper. However, in view of the stand taken by Spier concerning the publication of papers on acculturation -- a matter concerning which Cooper can give you full information -- I think the paper I suggest is very much in order.

In it I plan to discuss the place of acculturation as bridging a gap between the position of those who hold to historical 'reconstructions' on the one hand, and those who on the other insist on studying culture as though it stood still at a given moment and therefore could be adequately considered on a single time plane. The point I plan to make is that in most studies of acculturation that can be made at the present time we not only have scientifically ascertainable historic control of our data, but are in a position to study both the dynamics of cultural change and integration, and the behavior of human personality under conditions of stress, in a way that can not be done in any other type of situation available to the student (NUHP: MJH/JS 10/17/36).

Herskovits clearly had high ambitions for acculturation studies as an integrative force in a fragmenting discipline, "mediating between the historical and the functional orientations" (Stocking 1976:20), and incorporating also analyses of the relationship between culture and personality. Although acculturation studies did achieve considerable popularity on through the early postwar years. they did not in fact stem the "centrifugal tendencies" operating in the discipline. But on the matter of their legitimacy as anthropological topics, Herskovits was clearly vindicated in his dispute with Spier. The publication of his paper in 1937 marked the recognition of acculturation studies as a fit topic for the American Anthropologist. More generally, the study of cultural contact involving complex societies was accepted as falling within the purview of anthropology, without any compromise to its disciplinary identity.

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