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Sapir's Last Testament on Culture and Personality

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Edward Sapir

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CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

SAPIR'S LAST TESTAMENT ON CULTURE AND PERSONALITY

Less than four months before his death in February, 1939, the brilliant American linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir wrote what may be regarded as his last will and testament on the study of culture and personality--a subject to which he himself had contributed much of the fundamental theoretical groundwork over the preceding two decades. The occasion itself is indicative: then Sterling Professor at Yale, Sapir was responding to an unsolicited manuscript on culture and personality theory sent to him by a nineteen year old graduate of City College--the honors essay of Philip Selznick, now professor of Law and Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Sapir nevertheless took time for a considered response which expressed in a condensed and almost epigrammatic fashion viewpoints that might have gone into his never-finished book on "The Psychology of Culture." Although the methodological points were more extensively sketched (in some cases in very similar language) in an article published the preceding year in the American Journal of Sociology on "The Contribution of Psychiatry to an Understanding of Behavior in Society," the more informal context of the letter elicited reflections on related matters which are extremely suggestive. Sapir's comments on the unconscious psychological motivation of more extreme advocates of cultural relativity, as well as his thoughts on "the law of diminishing returns" in anthropology, may still today provoke both the historian's imagination and the anthropologist's self-reflective consciousness of the historical development of the discipline.

The letter is reproduced here (with the elision of one personal passage) by the kind permission of Professor Selznick and Professor J. David Sapir. (G.W.S.)

October 25, 1938

Mr. Philip S. Selznick,
3099 Brighton 6th Street
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Selznick,

I have read your essay with very great interest and am returning it to you under another cover. I believe that you have assimilated the culture and personality point of view very successfully. I find myself in substantial agreement with you at practically every point and I sincerely hope that you are planning to deepen your acquaintance with the problems suggested.

While the point of view which you discuss has largely been advanced by what might be described as the radical wing of anthropology, I believe that further work in this field, if it is to be truly significant and not merely philosophical in tone, is destined to come largely from those that are immediately concerned with psychiatric reality, that is from people who take seriously problems of personality organization and development. Practically, this means that the younger people like yourself who aim to contribute significantly to a clarification of problems of personality and culture should plunge boldly into personality problems. Specific cultural problems are of course of the greatest value, but I have come to feel that the law of diminishing returns operates rather quickly in anthropology. I mean to say that such ideas as cultural relativity and psychological reinterpretation of cultural forms are assimilated readily enough by an intelligent person on the basis of a comparatively slight knowledge of the ethnographic field. An extended knowledge of exotic cultures deepens of course our sense of cultural history, but it does not, after a certain point of sophistication has been reached, help very much with the clarification of the more fundamental question of the meaning of personality organization in cultural terms. Psychiatric insight can, I feel, not be obtained by the mere reading of a great deal of literature. Clinical experience and a patient analysis of actual case material are indispensable.

I judge from a number of passages in your essay that you share my feeling that there is danger of the growth of a certain scientific mythology in anthropological circles with regard to the psychological interpretation of culture. I believe this comes out most clearly in Ruth Benedict's book, "Patterns of Culture". Unless I misunderstand the direction of her thinking and of the thinking of others who are under her influence, there is altogether too great readiness to translate psychological analogies into psychological realities. I do not like the glib way in which many talk of such and such a culture as "paranoid" or what you will. It would be my intention to bring out clearly, in a book that I have still to write, the extreme methodological importance of distinguishing between actual psycholo-

gical processes which are of individual location and presumptive or "as if" psychological pictures which may be abstracted from cultural phenomena and which may give significant direction to individual development. To speak of a whole culture as having a personality configuration is, of course, a pleasing image, but I am afraid that it belongs more to the order of aesthetic or poetic constructs than of scientific ones.

The only critical reaction that I have had in reading your pages is a certain misgiving as to whether you were not stretching the idea of cultural relativity too much. Like many young people who are obviously exhilarated by symbols of revolt and seem to tend to fear the establishment of universals in behavior, you tend to hold off the establishment of the "normal" as much as possible. I am sure that this is a healthy tendency at the beginning of one's scientific career, but I think you will find that it may lead in the long run to superficiality. In this very sphere patient psychiatric work is destined to give us a more and more profound respect for the recognition of certain fundamental normalities regardless of cultural differences. Meanwhile it is perfectly true that anthropology has had a healthy effect in forcing the psychiatrist not to identify his ill-defined conception of normality with specific cultural forms. It will be our not too easy task to redefine normality on a broader cultural and psychiatric basis. There is one point that may possibly not have escaped your observation, and that is that there is often an unconscious or at least an unacknowledged motive for the denial of normalities which transcend the compulsions of culture. . . . One could write a very interesting paper on the usefulness of the concept of cultural relativity as a sophisticated form of what the psychiatrist somewhat brutally refers to as a flight from reality. Certainly this is not the whole story, but I have come to feel that there is far more in it than a liberal intelligence might wish to grant in the first place.

Anyway, I want to congratulate you on your intelligent grasp of the problems that you discuss and to thank you for giving me the opportunity of reading your interesting essay. Under another cover I am sending you a few reprints that you may be interested in.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Sapir

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CORRECTION(S).

We apologize for a number of errors of proof-reading in HAN VII:1. Gallatin's Synopsis (p. 5) was published in 1836, not 1846 as printed. In addition, there were some minor mistakes in German, Danish and Russian entries in the Bibliographica Arcana. We will try to avoid errors in the future, but make no guarantees.