



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 4
Issue 1 1977

Article 5

1-1-1977

More on Redcliffe-Brown and Lowie

George W. Stocking Jr.

Alexander Lesser

Robert Lowie

II. MORE ON RADCLIFFE-BROWN AND LOWIE

Our original intention was to publish Lowie's response to Radcliffe-Brown's comments on The History of Ethnological Theory (HAN III:2, p. 5). Second thought suggested, however, that while portions of it were quite illuminating of Lowie's conception of anthropological science, the length and the heat of the letter were perhaps disproportionate to the historical insight it offered. Radcliffe-Brown's letter, however, did elicit a response from one prominent anthropologist active at the time Radcliffe-Brown wrote to Lowie.

Dear Sirs,

In view of publication in the Newsletter of Radcliffe-Brown's tough letter to Lowie, I think note should be taken of Radcliffe-Brown's statement: "There is one absolutely fundamental point in which I differ from Boas... I hold that history and science are different things..."

Boas' "The Study of Geography" (1887) reprinted in "Race, Language and Culture" (1940) is specifically a statement of a fundamental difference between the physical sciences, which aim at the "deduction of laws from phenomena", and historical study, whose goal is "the thorough understanding of phenomena" in all their uniqueness and particularity. Boas considered this distinction basic in his own historical approach in anthropology.

Evidently, it is a fact of the history of anthropology that Radcliffe-Brown was uninformed and in error on fundamental principles of Boas' anthropology and methods.

Sincerely yours,

Alexander Lesser,
 Prof. Emeritus of Anthropology
 Hofstra University

In this context, it does seem worthwhile (with the permission of the Bancroft Library) to reproduce one paragraph of Lowie's five-page letter to Radcliffe-Brown:

The distinction between history and physical science has been familiar to me since my student days, when I read Windelband and Rickert. The point has not the importance for anthropological practitioners which you attach to it. I can recognize no watertight compartments in the pursuit of knowledge. Some problems of culture require recourse to geography, for others we must consult history, psychology, even metallurgy if we are to understand the development of bronze. In the ordering of data our procedure varies with the task: stratigraphy is a help in prehistory, not in the study of visions. Naturally, the procedure is different when I prove by critical examination of a source that in 1680 Hennepin met a buffalo police party among the Santee and when I compare the various police organizations of the Plains tribes. ... Since the investigator is one person, not usually a split personality, I am not clear what you would like him to do. My instinct is to get what I can from the phenomenon studied that might add to my understanding. (G.W.S.)