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## WHITE'S VIEW OF CULTURE

By A. L. KROEBER

IN A RECENT paper, "The Expansion of the Scope of Science,"<sup>1</sup> Leslie A. White maintains a series of propositions with which the present writer finds himself mainly and enthusiastically in accord, but which, precisely because of their importance, seem in need of certain limitations and clarifications.

The procedure will be followed of restating White's principal propositions, reworded by myself, and of then commenting upon them.

1. *Phenomena can be viewed, studied, and construed on a series of levels—such as the organic, psychic, social, and cultural levels or "dimensions"—whose recognition in the history of knowledge comes successively, gradually, and empirically.*

This is by now a wide-spread opinion. It has grown without self-consciousness, has no one outstanding name attached to it, and its full implications are as yet hardly recognized among many who essentially accept the view. Its recognition has come from students of science, as a by-product of their work. There appears to be no system of philosophy as such that makes serious use of the point of view. Comte's and Spencer's approximations to it are imperfect, are a century old, and their potentialities seem not to have been further developed and explored by philosophers. Personally, I know of no adequate attempt to examine systematically what the levels constitute or mean in terms of a theory of knowledge.

2. *Regularly, some of the phenomena of one level are explainable in terms of factors of the level or levels below.*

This is the familiar process of *reductionism*. Phenomena of one level, or certain of their properties, are made intelligible also in terms of factors, forces, or conceptual elements of a lower level. At least, they seem to be "more" intelligible when they also fit into a system of greater depth. Thus, the properties of chemical elements correspond with a degree of regularity and predictability to the physical structure of the atom, the number, spatial relation, mass, and

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<sup>1</sup> White, 1947.

energy-charge of its constituents. Psychological emotions like anger and fear are called into activity by the physiological release of adrenalin into the bloodstream and the consequent discharge of sugar from the liver. Biochemistry is actually the conversion of descriptively or functionally conceived processes of physiology into chemically conceived ones.

The over-all tendency of reductionism is obviously monistic. Phenomena of one level are explained away as such—in one sense—in being resolved into factors of another level or order.

3. *With equal regularity, however, certain phenomena of each level stubbornly resist reduction. These remain inexplicable and meaningless in terms of the lower level, whereas on their own level they may fit into intelligible relations.*

Anger and fear *both* reduce to adrenalin and glucose discharge, indistinguishably. Which one is felt and behaviorized is not a matter of chemistry within the organism but depends on a relation between the total organism and the surroundings outside it. Jealousy is a very definite though variable thing psychologically, but a very obscure one physiologically, as White says.<sup>2</sup> An affect of hostility may be directed toward the rival, the love-object, both, or neither. It is the total previous history of the subject that determines the choice between such possible outcomes. So far as a hormone may be involved, it could only be as a cause giving a consistent effect. The business of the psychologist is precisely to tell in terms of the complete situation—which means the individual's whole experience, including his interpersonal and cultural exposure—why he has the impulse to punish once his girl and another time his rival or perhaps himself instead. Obviously, physiology as such cannot touch this problem.

In general, approach from an underlying level may hope to explain the uniformities in phenomena of an upper level, but does not even attack the problem of their diversities. Granted that we know the full biochemistry of the sex drive, we still know nothing of why a thousand human populations are likely to practice five hundred distinguishable kinds of marriage besides innumerable varieties of extramaternal sex behavior. White is explicit and emphatic on this point.<sup>3</sup> Presumably most cultural anthropologists would agree. It is certain that all historically-minded ones would.

4. *It may accordingly be concluded that reductionism is valid and fruitful so far as it can be established, but that complete reduction of the phenomena of the cosmos to factors of a single, unified order or level is an unattainable limit.*

No one can foretell the future, but our experience to date makes it likely that there will always be irreducible residues which do make sense and do have meaning in terms of relations within their own level. It is in fact conceivable

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-193.

that as the body of reduced or trans-level understandings grows, our corpus of unreduced intra-level understandings will also continue to grow. Its simplicity is what renders reductionism attractive as a conceptual system. To believe that essential reduction has been accomplished is an illusion; that it is about to be, is a wish fulfilment. Our fullest understanding of the world may well continue to be in pluralistic terms.

How far, or in what sense, the intelligible relations determinable within one level are causal, will be examined below, under "8."

5. *The levels relate to separate aspects of phenomena, but this does not have to be taken to mean that there exist separate actualities or autonomous entities for each level.*

The realization of the pragmatic utility and necessity of recognition of distinctive levels runs a risk of being pushed to a point of excess. In that event the aspects or properties characteristic of each level are exaggerated and transcendentalized into entities or kinds of realities in their own right: life, mind, society, culture. Sometimes the motivation of such hypostasizing or reification is the ardor of a new attitude. Sometimes it is a hangover from old pre-scientific concepts like soul. The result is that radical innovators and die-hard reactionaries of the intellect may find themselves fellow-partisans against an orthodox bourgeoisie of reductionists, and that the latter do not discriminate between their opponents.

From a mere insistence on the importance of recognizing culture as a distinct domain of phenomena, there has been considerable spilling-over to the further but hasty and usually hazy attitude which sees culture as a special kind of entity or substance. Malinowski thought he could eat his cake and have it too. In the same essay he credited culture with being "a reality *sui generis*" and yet saved his monism by deriving the manifestations of this same culture from physiological needs and psychological imperatives.

I have been under fire, long ago from Boas and Benedict for mysticism, and subsequently from Bidney for idealism, in reifying culture. White has cited several such criticisms.<sup>4</sup> I take this opportunity of formally and publicly recanting any extravagances and overstatements of which I may have been guilty through overardor of conviction, in my "Superorganic" and since. As of 1948, it seems to me both unnecessary and productive of new difficulties, if, in order to account for the phenomena of culture, one assumes any entity,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201. To wit, that I have considered "culture a mystic entity that exists outside the society of its individual carriers and that moves by its own force" (Boas, 1928, p. 235). "Mystical phraseology . . . Like Kroeber they have called in a force he calls the superorganic to account for the cultural process" (Benedict, 1934, p. 231). "The culturalistic fallacy" is shown in the tendency "to hypostasize culture and to conceive it as a transcendental, superorganic, or superpsychic force which alone determines human, historical destiny," and by "the assumption that culture is a force that may make and develop itself" (Bidney, 1944, p. 42).

substance, kind of being or set of separate, autonomous, and wholly self-sufficient forces. I do not find that I have ever explicitly declared my belief in such. But I do find that I have been ambiguous, and that I have written a number of passages which might be so construed and which quite probably do contain implications in this direction. I am grateful to my critics in proportion as they have been specific in indicating such implications. My present conception—free from ambiguity or unsoundness, I hope—of the nature of the forces or causes that make culture is discussed under “8” below.

It is easy to say more than one means, or to mean more than one is aware of, in this field. Nobody would accuse Lowie of mysticism or of lack of clarity. Yet White quotes Lowie's own words to the effect that culture represents “a distinct domain,” is “a thing *sui generis*,” “can be explained only in terms of itself,” and “appears as a closed system.”<sup>6</sup> A thing *sui generis* which is also a domain is not quite the same as a reality *sui generis* but it is far along on the way. Lowie's habitual precision and sanity, and above all the total context of his work, free him beyond doubt of any attainder of “mystically” regarding culture as a sort of autonomous substance. Presumably it is my past claim of autonomous *forces* that has given alarm and has earned me the label. As a matter of fact, I would not at present go as far as Lowie once did. I would now say that culture was *primarily* intelligible in terms of itself, not *only* in terms of itself.

6. *There is general agreement that the basic level or levels are the physical and the chemical (jointly the inorganic), and, next above, the organic one. Whether the organic is stretched upward to include the psychological is a function of how strait a reductionist one is. There does seem to be general agreement that the last four levels are the physiological, psychological, social, and cultural.*

The number of levels is not absolute. It varies according to reference and goal of consideration. For some purposes it is convenient to treat all sub-organic phenomena as a unit. On the contrary, it is now and then useful to separate organic phenomena into those of plants and animals,<sup>6</sup> the latter alone showing evidences of a superimposed psychic level of phenomena. A single psychosomatic level is fashionable at the moment. The social and cultural are often still not distinguished, as White points out, when it is useful to do so. Yet there are situations in which reference to undifferentiated sociocultural phenomena is also convenient.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> White, p. 200.

<sup>6</sup> White's resting of physiology on anatomy introduces a different principle, that of structure-function, of which it seems doubtful whether it has much to do with level. Likewise, astronomy is not subjacent to physics and chemistry, but is the application of physics and chemistry to remote spatial areas—and with *historical* reference to the unique events in these remotenesses. *Position* in the cosmos can in any event scarcely be a criterion of level.

<sup>7</sup> Much as on p. 181, White introduces social psychology into his diagram between psychology and sociology, but on p. 189 omits it again.

In short, it is the position order of the levels that is important. The degree to which it is useful to separate or merge adjacent levels varies with the objective of discussion.

7. *White holds that the scientific recognition of levels occurs historically in the order of ease of coherent explanation in terms other than of the autonomous self or soul or free human will.*

In other words, according to White, animism is least insisted on by the undisciplined intellect on the inorganic level, and most easily displaced there by a system of scientific interpretation; and the last citadel of animism lies in the domain of culture.<sup>8</sup>

This is largely true; but, historically, White has oversimplified the process. Chemistry should, according to his formula, have been developed before anatomy and everything above anatomy, whereas chemistry notoriously was a late science to crystallize out. This was for reasons such as historic lateness of systematic experimentation, which have nothing to do with level. It is however a fact that recognition of specifically social aspects of phenomena did come late, and of cultural ones still later—as witness the non-differentiation of the two by Comte and Durkheim.

8. *Laws, forces, and perhaps complete causalities lying within the cultural level are determinable, according to White.*

This proposition can be seen in two ways, as is evident from White's citations<sup>9</sup> from Simmel. While culture is a "structure of independent reality [*sic*], which leads its life after peculiar laws and by virtue of peculiar forces, independent of all its individual components," nevertheless "in the last analysis only individuals exist," according to Simmel, and the "spiritual structures" of which culture apart from artifacts consists "have their existence only in personal minds;" so that "to think of them outside of persons is a mysticism."

With a philosopher of the stature of Simmel arriving at this sort of seeming impasse, it is evident that this part of the problem is not easy.<sup>10</sup> Culture is credited with having a reality with laws and forces of its own, but also with existing only in persons. It is no wonder that non-philosophers have floundered a bit in this area.

For my part, I am ready to concede that culture exists only in persons in the sense that it resides, has its locus, only in them. Incidentally, culture also exists then in physiological reactions, in biochemical ones, and beyond, in

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209: "Scientific interpretation will appear first and grow faster in those areas where the determinants of human behavior are the weakest and least significant."

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195. The citations are from *Am. Journ. Sociol.* 3: 665.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the difficulties caused for many Germans by their use of the ambiguous "spiritual" (*Geist, geistig*) which sometimes means merely "psychological" but sometimes "outside the realm of nature and science."

physico-chemical ones. And therewith is evident the absurdity of reductionism as a practical method of exploratory scientific operation. In fact, reductionism is not an investigatory tool at all. It is not a method of extending understanding over new domains, but a procedure for integrating understandings that have been attained. It consolidates territory already overrun.

To the investigator of culture, as long as he remains merely such, it seems irrelevant for the time being where culture resides, or whether it exists autonomously or not, as long as he has genuinely cultural data to operate with and is free to operate upon them with the methods he finds most productive. The locus and reality of culture are irrelevant in the sense that they do not affect his specific cultural problem nor his specific method of dealing therewith. There are two courses open to students of culture. They can either try to resolve it into something else, in which case they will obviously not learn very much about culture; or they can try to learn about its manifestations in the world of nature. If to do this necessitates the provisional freezing of cultural phenomena as such on the cultural level, and acting as if culture were an autonomous realm, well and good: for except by so doing we shall never find out how much autonomy cultural phenomena have or have not, nor what kind of autonomy. The *as if* attitude gives us a perfectly adequate way to proceed; and White's acceptance of this attitude<sup>11</sup> seems much more fruitful than his denunciation of Simmel as stubborn, mired, and blinded by an obsolete metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> White's two positions on this point are of course not wholly consistent: if Simmel is just perversely wrong, then culture does really "exist" on its own level and we do not have to fall back on any "as if" attitude.

As for those who contend that cultures do not enamel their fingernails, we who are interested in culture phenomena can cheerfully concede this and keep on our way. Lynd is not a pettifogging literalist. He is interested in sub-cultural phenomena of social relations, whose focus tends to be somewhat disturbed by the impact of the cultural approach, to paraphrase slightly White's appropriate citation from MacIver. A few neighborly comments like this across the backyard fence of sociology and anthropology should not be taken too earnestly. They pass just because we are neighbors in area and endeavor.

If we waive a separate reality or locus of residence for culture, what then about its autonomous laws, order, and forces? Is there anything of that sort left, or do we have to go completely reductionist?

The partial solution which I propose I owe to Bidney<sup>13</sup> and his bringing the four Aristotelian kinds of "causes"<sup>14</sup> to bear on the problem. The efficient causes of cultural phenomena unquestionably are men: individual personalities who are in interpersonal and social relations. It seems to me that this cannot

<sup>11</sup> White, 1947, p. 204.      <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.      <sup>13</sup> Bidney, 1942, p. 453; 1944, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> In the case of a house the "material cause" would be its wood; the "formal," the plan or design of the building; the "efficient," the carpenter; the "final," the goal of shelter.

be denied, and that there is neither use nor honesty in trying to whittle any of it away. But the manifestations of culture come characteristically in certain forms, patterns, or configurations, many of which are large, ramifying, and enduring. Now while persons undoubtedly make and produce these cultural forms, our knowledge of persons—and very largely also our knowledge of societies of persons—has failed conspicuously to explain the cultural *forms*: to derive specific cultural effects from specific psychic or social causes. In fact, psychological and social concepts or mechanisms are not even much good at *describing* cultural forms.<sup>15</sup> Such descriptions or characterizations begin to mean something only when they are made on the cultural level—in terms of intercultural relations and of cultural values.

Every anthropologist or historian concerned with culture realizes that cultural situations make more sense, reveal more meaning, in proportion as we know more of their cultural antecedents, or, generically, more total cultural context. In other words, cultural forms or patterns gain in intelligibility as they are set in relation to other cultural patterns. This interrelating of forms is evidently like the consideration of Aristotelian “formal causes.”<sup>16</sup> Of course they are not “causes” at all in the sense of modern mechanistic science, whose concern is with efficient causes (if with any). And if Aristotelian terminology be objected to in 1948, I shall be happy to adopt whatever more appropriate new term may be coined or proposed.

I am convinced that this primacy of patterns<sup>17</sup> and pattern relation must be accepted in our intellectual operations with cultural data, possibly not for ever, but at any rate in the present development of our learning and science.<sup>18</sup> It is easy to cry for dynamic mechanisms, but they have been very hard to find. What the mechanisms or efficient causes residing in persons have explained in culture is perhaps some of its vague recurrences, its hazily defined common denominators. All the characterized qualities of culture, all its variations and specificities, remain essentially unexplained by dynamic psychic mechanisms. Historians, though their material consists of a mixture of culture, persons, and events, increasingly realize the inadequacy of specific causal explanations, and more and more are content to present sequences of significant forms.

The clearest case is furnished by linguistics, easily that one of all social and humanistic studies which follows the most rigorous and exact method. Speech is a wholly human and wholly social phenomenon, but linguistics

<sup>15</sup> As shown by the fact that we have now in America a dozen or two of systematic books on Social Psychology which all deal with psycho-social mechanism and nearly all carefully refrain from dealing with the cultures produced by the mechanism.

<sup>16</sup> Bidney (in the two passages cited in f.n. 13) has suggested that “material” and “final causes” also enter into culture, but forms and form relations seem to me most characteristic.

<sup>17</sup> How far values are included in culture patterns is a separate problem.

<sup>18</sup> Which of course is itself a phase of a pattern.



thrives by being completely anonymous and impersonal, with a minimum of reference to its carriers and their psychology, and by dealing with the relations of specific forms without serious concern for their specific productive causes. The relation of *d*, *t*, *ts* in *deux*, *two*, *zwei* is a "law" in the sense of being a regularity of form, of consistent relation of pattern. But the linguist does not generally ask what made English have *t* where French has *d*. He could not give the answer and he knows that he could not; and—if he has ever thought about it—he probably suspects that no reductionist could give it either. The linguist may also be quite ready to concede that in his way the physicist is right if he claims that actually language is only air vibrations made by the larynges and mouths of individuals of *Homo sapiens*. On the physicist's level language is that and remains that. The linguist gets something more significant than air waves out of his material because he does not try to explain it through efficient causes residing in persons, but by taking such causality for granted and concerning himself with the *interrelations* of linguistic forms in his linguistic phenomena.

Culture as a whole is more manifold and less channeled than its part, language. That perhaps is why students of culture have been less courageous or decisive in realizing that their most fertile procedure is essentially the same.<sup>19</sup> Like language, culture exists only in and through human individuals and their psychosomatic properties; and like language it acquires a certain larger intelligibility and systematic significance in the degree that it takes these persons for granted and proceeds to investigate the interrelations of superpersonal forms of culture.

In these statements I do not feel that I am, as White thinks, failing to "hold consistently to the culturological point of view;"<sup>20</sup> I am only delimiting and trying to clarify it. That a historical approach happens to be more fruitful with reference to culture, and a mechanical-scientific one more fruitful in regard to matter and energy, is the concession of a difference, not of an inferiority. And culture may well yet reveal "laws" similar to the "laws" which the linguist calls sound shifts; only they will presumably be, like these, primarily relations of forms (synchronic or sequential), not laws of efficient causality. So far as the latter are determinable for culture, the prospect seems to me to be that they will continue to reside in the psychic or psychosomatic level. And why not? Who are we that we should claim utter self-sufficiency for our domain?

9. *Determinism—as opposed to free will or animism—being resisted vigorously by scientifically undisciplined personalities, the apperception or recognition of cultural phenomena as such is still being fought, according to White; in fact is being fought with increasing success since about 1930, he says.*

<sup>19</sup> At least at present. No one can safely predict far ahead.

<sup>20</sup> White, 1947, p. 199.

This seems to be a half truth. I have myself made a similar charge,<sup>21</sup> in a specific case where I felt that chaos in phenomena was more congenial to my opponent than any determinate order that limited the freedom of the human person. But I hesitate to generalize the accusation. I am myself a determinist. But I do not see any one-to-one correspondence between determinism and enlightenment, nor between intellectual reactionism and free will. If Bidney can leave room for God and prayer<sup>22</sup> in his interpretation of culture, or Toynbee for God and free will in his history—well, I do not operate that way, but do not see why I should be concerned over their doing so, at least not until it is evident that their attitude affects the results of their studies. After all, there have been and are determinists and Calvinist predestinarians in religious dogma as well as free-willists. And further I am aware that in living my practical life I must necessarily, if I am to act at all, do so *as if* I enjoyed freedom of will, even though intellectually and impersonally I choose to remain a determinist. This is the reverse and complement of what the humanist historian would do in pursuing his profession if he happened to be a personal determinist; and there perhaps are such.

In short, the correlation seems to me considerably less simple than to White, even though we both are determinists, at least of a sort.

I also doubt that there has been a recession since around 1930. In the conviction of a cause, it is easy to be pessimistic about its progress. Looking back thirty years on my essay called "The Superorganic,"<sup>23</sup> I am struck by the sense that pervades it of a great need for freeing cultural phenomena<sup>24</sup> from the oppression of biological thinking. I do not think now that the yoke of the organic really lay heavy on our "culturological" necks in 1917. If there was such a yoke, the biologists of the time were probably hardly aware of imposing it. It has certainly lifted completely by now, at least in intellectual circles, and that spontaneously, without the pomp of a formal revolution.

It is well also to remember that American students come to a University, and mostly leave it, with astonishingly little experience in historical attitude of any sort, and hence with considerable difficulty in apprehending at first hand what cultural phenomena actually are like when viewed historically. On the other hand, personality is the slogan of the moment; and so they clamor by the dozens and hundreds to be told the latest final insight into culture and personality, without being very clear as to what either is. Add that as a nation we love gadgets, that devices like "inkblot tests" have some of the outward qualities of a gadget—and the prospect may look dim to those who are interested in culture as such. But with experience one learns that these waves go

<sup>21</sup> In Appendix of Richardson and Kroeber, 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Bidney, 1946, p. 541.      <sup>23</sup> Kroeber, 1917.

<sup>24</sup> And I was still so crude as to call them "social" half the time, when I obviously meant cultural!

much as they come. In a decade or two Rorschachs may have been displaced as stimuli of fashion response by their successor of the day. As late as 1915 the very word "personality" still carried overtones chiefly of piquancy, unpredictability, intellectual daring: a man's "personality" was much like a woman's "it." And who spills any feeling now about acculturation, since the word has lost its emotional charge and has been seen to denote part of one of the ever-present, regular, humdrum processes of human history?

I am not sanguine as to progress of interest in culture being rapid, but I see no recession.

10. *The supposed recent regression from an autonomous science of culture White construes as due to the obsolescence of our social system of capitalism and imperialism, its dedication to the status quo, and our unwillingness to recognize both evolution and culture; but the halt will be only temporary.*

These points in the two final paragraphs of the body of White's essay are largely a non sequitur. They are mentioned here only in the endeavor to keep them out of the discussion which the remainder of White's challenging paper will expectably provoke.

It may be doubted that our social system is obsolete—this because of the fair rapidity with which it is adapting to change. We do alter our status quo, even though it is favorable enough to make us want to keep much of it. We can cheerfully admit our capitalist "system" as a gradual historic growth, while laughing off the implication of its being a plotted conspiracy. And so on. Yet even if our social and political direction as a nation were belated and benighted, it is hard to see what that has to do with the more or less explicit theoretical recognition or non-recognition of culture by some hundreds of professional anthropologists and sociologists. Can it really be that soon the final judgment day is coming when *all* the truths in the world will segregate themselves on the one side, *all* the symbols of error and powers of evil on the other? Unless that be so, these final sweeping dicta by White are irrelevant to his main intellectual thesis, and their injection tends to detract from the consideration which most of his trenchant essay deserves.

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