

## CULTURE CHANGE THEORY IMPLICIT IN THE WRITINGS OF A. L. KROEBER

R. Clyde McCone  
California State College at Long Beach

American anthropology has been characterized, at least since Boas, by a minimal development of theory. However, no disciplined understanding of any body of phenomena is without some systemization of thought. Inherent in the selection of a class of phenomena, in the choice of approach, in the conceptualization of substance and processes, and in the resulting understanding of events is a more or less consistent theory. In a time when anthropologists are consciously attempting to expand the explicit theoretical framework of their discipline, it may be well to review the potential which is implicit in the outstanding developments of the past. Such a review is limited in this paper to the phenomena of change and is focused on the works of the late Dean of American Anthropologists.

### Approach

Sociological approaches are concerned with normative and structural changes taking place within and between systems of social relations. Psychological approaches are occupied with the psychological dynamics of change or change on the personality level. A third approach concerns itself exclusively with the cultural level. Social relations, psychological dynamics, and the situational aspects of action are taken as universal givens. In this third type, which characterizes Kroeber's work, the conceptualization of the processes of change and the theory of change is wholly within the frame of reference of culture. A fourth type may be found in the works of Geertz (1957) and others, which treat culture as a normative system and social relations as a functional system, both of which co-exist in empirical reality. The incongruity developing between these two systems provides the dynamics of change.

Within a strictly cultural frame of reference there is found a polar distinction in approaches. First, there are those whose explanations seek to "account for" and in a sense predict the course or direction of change. The evolutionary approaches of White and Steward are examples. Second, there are those who seek rather to "take account of" change and are more descriptive rather than predictive. Concern is more with change that has taken place or is taking place both in the description of the process and in the reconstruction of the course as in the case of prehistory. It is in this second group that Kroeber's approach to change must be considered. Through most of his career he was a consciously committed determinist, (contrast 1952:116 with 1952:9) yet he consistently rejected determinism on the diachronic dimension of history (1948:632). In the conclusion to Configurations of Culture Growth (1944:761) he states ". . . I see no evidence of any true law in the phenomena dealt with; nothing cyclical, regularly repetitive, or necessary." Kroeber calls his approach natural history, distinguishing it both from the structural-functional approach of science and from the history of the historians. He regards it as the meaningful integration of diachronic phenomena (1948:63); "the interpretation . . . which binds meaningless facts or events of human history into a meaningful pattern or design" (1948:99); as an historical reconstruction whether datable documents are available or not (1948:65).

The closest Kroeber comes to treating the direction of change is in his concept of progress. Yet, even here the perspective primarily focuses on the past and cannot be thought of in a predictive sense.

Approaches to change may also be considered according to the scale of their time perspective. This criteria gives us two types: macro and micro. Macro theories concern themselves with change over the broad stretches of history. Micro theories, on the other hand, tend more to encompass the immediately observable processes. Kroeber's conceptualization of change in terms of invention, diffusion, and acculturation may be used in either micro or macro theories. However, the theoretical implications of his works are chiefly macro in scope such as his styles and configurations in civilizations.

Many other distinctions in approaches could be observed such as pure and applied. Kroeber has a concern with knowledge as an end rather than as an application to the problems of change. A formal table comparing the identifying emphasis of Kroeber with that of other theorists may be constructed as follows:

	Predictive		Descriptive Integrative	
	Micro	Macro	Micro	Macro
Sociological	Loomis:1960		Firth:1959	Becker:1952
Psychological	Hallowell:1955		Barnett:1953	
Cultural		White:1959 Steward:1955		Kroeber:1957
Plural Frames of Reference	Geertz:1957			

A few generalizations may be hypothesized from this framework:

1. Applied approaches tend to be micro in perspective and are psychological, sociological, or plural in their frame of reference.
2. Those cultural approaches attempting to deal with changes in micro perspective usually do so on the psychological level.
3. The descriptive integrative approach to change from a micro perspective does not easily yield to generalization and therefore tends to be considered in the framework of history.
4. The sociology of knowledge may be considered as theories of descriptive integration, perhaps on both the macro and micro time scale. These are usually cultural and/or sociological.
5. Macro-descriptive integration theories are usually not applied theories. If they are, the meaning of applied is modified (cf. Kroeber 1963:39ff).

This system of types is arbitrary and is in no wise to be regarded as exhaustive. For example, micro and macro may be used with reference to the unit of social structure or culture involved as well as time perspective. These, however, serve to make a meaningful comparative identification of A. L. Kroeber's approach.

It is not held that every theory or theorist of social change, including the ones here mentioned, can be limited to a single category of this formal system. Their emphasis, however, may be thus validly indicated. Marx's grandiose theory of history may be an outstanding exception. It rests on the psychological dynamics of the alienation of labor and of class consciousness. Yet the element of class relation and class struggle is sociological. It takes in a macro time perspective and yet is also explanatory of phenomena on a micro time perspective. Further, it is without doubt the most applied theory of change in the world today.

### Conceptualization

Kroeber observes two kinds of culture processes, i.e.: change and persistence (1948:344-384). Culture habits, involvement in the total culture pattern, unconscious learning, and conscious teaching are all conceived as processes of persistence. Processes of change are classified in terms of (1) factors operating from within the culture, (2) factors operating from without the culture, and (3) a combination of internal and external factors.

Change produced from within a culture is viewed as a process of invention, which is defined as a new combination of existing culture traits. An invention may be technological, intellectual, or institutional. Thus far it is very similar to Barnett's (1953) concept of innovation. A fundamental difference is maintained, however, when Kroeber insists on the "superorganic" character of invention. "We may lay it down as a definition that anthropologically, sociologically, and historically, an invention is not an invention until it is accepted in a culture. Until then it exists merely individually or mechanically. . . ." (1948:362).

Minor consideration is given to another internal culture process called "culture loss" which is in some sense the reverse of invention. Most culture loss is conceived as the displacement resulting from new inventions. However, environmental changes in supply of materials or population changes due to catastrophic events may also result in the loss of certain skills and practices.

Somewhat connected with the idea of culture loss is that of the death of cultures. Kroeber observes that apart from the extinction of man the extinction of culture is not conceivable. Specific cultures may lose some of their traits. The only sense, however, in which a culture can be conceived as dying is in such cases as the discontinuance of a "particular, characterized over-all configuration of pattern grouping" (Kroeber 1948:383). On the other hand, the society which lives under the culture continues on and also much of the content of the culture survives in cultures which succeed it.

Three levels of internal change (1948:383) are conceived. First, there are those which are "alterations in the subsistence-economic-technolog-

ical level such as the Neolithic Revolution [and the] Industrial Revolution." The second level of internal changes involves what Kroeber calls "biological play impulse in its cultural expression." Included on this level are fashion changes and the manifestation of affect in the form of restlessness, fatigue, etc. The third level or class of changes is labeled growth changes and a most extreme example, revolutions

Changes that are dependent on external factors are conceptualized under the terms "diffusion" and "acculturation." Diffusion considers change purely from the perspective of the movement of culture traits or complexes from one culture to another. In acculturation the perspective is from the standpoint of the total cultures involved in contact. "Acculturation comprises those changes produced in a culture by the influence of another culture which result in an increased similarity of the two" (Kroeber 1948:425).

Diffusion is, of course, always operative in acculturation. Interestingly enough sociological criteria are used to distinguish two types of acculturation. They are (1) acculturation with dominance, and (2) acculturation without dominance (Kroeber 1948:428-432). Hence, the power factor of the set of social relationships is used to differentiate between dominant and permissive acculturation.

Invention by stimulus diffusion conceptualizes change involving in a unique manner both internal and external factors. It has been observed in most instances the form of a culture trait may be taken over but a different meaning given to it. In contrast to this, stimulus diffusion is essentially idea diffusion which results in a cultural invention. An outstanding example of stimulus diffusion as observed by Kroeber is the invention of the Cherokee alphabet by Sequoya. The idea of writing and some of the symbols were from English but the resulting syllabic alphabet was distinctly a Cherokee invention.

Kroeber's conceptualization of change may be visualized in the following formal framework:

		Locus of Dynamic	
		Within Culture	Between Cultures
Culture Processes	Change	1) Invention 2) Culture loss 3) Culture death	1) Diffusion 2) Acculturation Dominant Permissive
	Persistence	1) Culture habit 2) Unconscious learning 3) Conscious learning 4) Total Culture pattern	

Stimulus Diffusion

These formal categories seem to suggest that Kroeber gave at best a minimum attention to the processes of persistence in culture contact. That such processes must exist is attested to by the fact that large numbers of primitive tribes had some contacts among themselves prior to their contact with western civilization. Evidence is also observed in such sub-culture groups as the Amish and the Hutterites. The dynamic in each of these examples would appear to be strong "ingroup versus outgroup" attitudes in their systems of social relations. Perhaps Kroeber's choice of a purely cultural frame of reference as opposed to the sociological may account for his not conceptualizing any processes of persistence in the contact situation. He did take into account nativistic movements (1948:437-441), but these are reactions against change that has taken place. He also recognizes the phenomenon of resistance to diffusion as being similar to resistance to the acceptance of invention and being possibly linked to some perception of economic or ideological threat (1948:416). It seems that it should be possible to develop a cultural conceptualization of the processes of persistence. In the examples given above the "ingroup versus outgroup" attitudes rest upon beliefs which are the legitimatizing foundations for meaningful existence in each of the groups. Perhaps on this basis it would be possible to develop a concept of culture "inertia" that could encompass the phenomena of persistence as it might be found in all types of cultures in their contacts with each other.

### Theory

Kroeber's goal was never that of a development of an abstract level of theory. He says of himself, "I am still such a natural historian of culture. The intellectual process is one of widening generalization and understanding, not of hypotheses which are then tested out as in a laboratory. . . I am not a formal theoretician" (1952:3). Only a few generalizations are made in terms of the concepts of the processes of culture change. In modifying the popular maxim that "necessity is the mother of invention," he holds that need is at best a spur which can in no wise determine the nature of the invention (Kroeber 1948:352). Further, invention is as much the mother of need, so that together they become a mutually supporting dynamic of change not governed by any prior notion of practical utility. Every invention springs from a culture base of antecedents and, at least on the technological level, these antecedents are cumulative so that with every increase in the base the potential for invention increases.

Diffusion becomes a useful concept for Kroeber in the reconstruction of culture history by archeologically tracing the movement of traits. As to the diffusion of traits, he observes that the form has less resistance to spread than the meaning. In fact, the meaning of the trait is often reshaped by the pattern of the receiving culture. Thus, as gun powder spread from China to Europe, its meaning and use changed considerably. In China it wasn't "gun" powder. Another characteristic of diffusion is that traits tend to move out from centers toward the more marginal areas during periods of growth. They may, however, move centripetally during decline (Kroeber 1944: 815).

The process of diffusion is not fundamentally different from that of invention, or for that matter, the transmission of culture traits to succeeding generations, for all require social acceptances. However, the conditions

of social acceptance are different in each case. Kroeber observes (1948:412) that ". . . intra society transmission of culture in time must normally tend toward persistence, but intersocietal transmission in space tends toward change."

These few generalizations by no means exhaust those made by Kroeber. Perhaps more should be brought together to discover the theoretical potential which they may contain.

The major part of Kroeber's theory is not built around his conceptualization of the processes of change but rather in the character of culture wholes and in conceptual distinctions which he makes in culture itself. His descriptive integrative theory of change rests on structural distinctions which he labels: "reality culture," "value culture," and "social culture" (1952:152-166). Of these, reality culture and value culture play the most important role. White and many other anthropologists make the threefold distinctions in culture subsystems of technological, sociological, and ideological. Kroeber's distinction may be conceived as dividing the area covered by the technological and the ideological in a somewhat different fashion. (See Figs:1 and 2.)

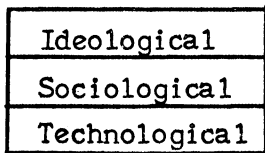


Figure 1: White

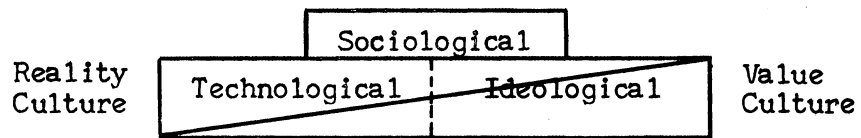
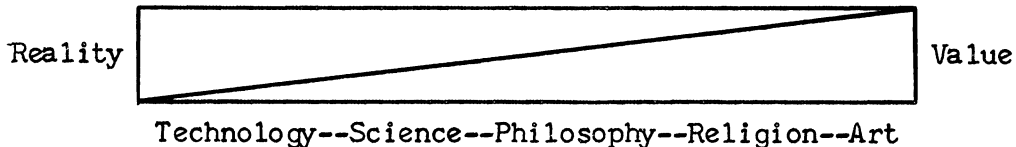


Figure 2: Kroeber

Substantive divisions of culture are then conceived as ranging on a continuum between the reality pole and the value pole in the following manner:



The closer an activity is toward the reality pole the more it is characterized by reality culture and vice versa. Technology is thus conceived as being most purely reality culture and art is most purely value culture. Within this kind of a framework Kroeber (1952:165) makes the following theoretical generalizations:

1. Reality culture is largely diffusional and accumulative.
2. Value culture tends to be re-creative.
3. Societal culture tends to be neither specifically accumulative nor specifically creative.

It is the recognition of the peculiar character of value culture that lays the foundation for most of Kroeber's theoretical treatment of change. This foundation was laid early in the essay "The Superorganic," which is really the fountainhead of all his later work (1952:22ff). One of the many fundamental points of this essay is that the clustering of genius and of simultaneous inventions is to be regarded as cultural rather than as biological phenomena. The ratio of "gene pool" of genius in a population is assumed to

remain relatively constant over time; therefore periods of florescence in art, philosophy, and science must be regarded as cultural phenomena. Since all of these--even science--to some extent partake of value culture, they each flourish until the creative potential of its pattern is fulfilled. For some time then no great genius comes to the attention of society, that is, until a new pattern begins to take shape and flourish. In science the value aspect centers chiefly around basic premises and the scientific problems toward which they direct the interest of the scientist. In this perspective the incidence of genius is seen as the product of cultural processes rather than being a matter of unequal genetic endowment at different periods of time. In an introductory section to Configurations of Culture Growth (1944: 15) Kroeber writes:

. . . Culture florescences . . . reveal themselves as tending strongly to come in pattern waves. Hence the inference is justified that it is something in a wavelike character of culture growths which is at the bottom of the otherwise unexplainable clusterings of genius.

Kroeber goes on in this book to view the development of philosophy, science, philology, sculpture, painting, drama, literature, music, and the growth of nations within several civilizations in terms of this descriptive theory of change.

Kroeber stands here in a dual contrast with Leslie White. White sees in technology, which is the purest aspect of Kroeber's reality culture, the dynamics by which he can "account for" change throughout the whole culture system. Or, in other words, evolution and growth of technology result in changes in the sociological system and eventually in the ideological system of values. Kroeber, on the other hand, finds in value culture the chief characteristic by which he "takes account" of the macro process and course of change.

The value based theory of change finds further development in a more recent work, Style and Civilizations. In this work Kroeber (1957:151) makes a very concise statement of his theory as it was developed under the concept of style:

The historical behavior of movements in philosophy, scholarship, mathematics, and pure or fundamental science is quite similar to that of the fine art styles. I mean by this that the time profile curve of value of product, or rating of talent of the producers, is generically the same in the several activities. In other words, intellectual creativity and aesthetic creativity behave alike historically, presumably because they operate in equivalent ways: they both produce intrinsic values. . . . In general, pure styles have a limited life, presumably because they exhaust their creative possibilities and have to begin over with an enlarged or otherwise new base.

To the extent that science consists of reality culture it may escape some of this "florescence" phenomena. However, after observing the development of science from the time of Egypt and Mesopotamia to modern times, Kroeber (1944: 204) concludes that, "science does not differ essentially from other creative activities of human culture and is produced in irregular pulses, cycles, or intensive bursts of growths." It is the products of science that are observed to be accumulative; the process of production, "runs a course like a fever.

. . . its activity is cyclic; substantially as cyclic as that of the non-accumulative supposedly untrammelled arts" (loc. cit.).

Style theory receives a specialized extension when applied to women's dress. It is observed that there is a "basic ideal pattern of Western women's dress, mediaeval and modern, [that] has gone through a thousand years of constant remodeling without any fundamental change" (Kroeber 1957:20). This basic pattern is "an ideal implicit in the style itself, a half-conscious value sought for by the style" (ibid.:19). Ordinarily fashion changes are minor "superstructural changes" carried out in conformity to the basic pattern. On the other hand, in times of social and political stress, "fashion style then works against its basic pattern" (ibid.:27). In the correlation between an aspect of the culture pattern and the condition of social relations some important theoretical connections might be expected but here Kroeber is very cautious:

We need not doubt the generic finding that the unsettlement of the times is communicated to fashions--that they are influenced and also become unsettled. But the how of the unsettlement of dress is not dictated by the socio-political conditions; that must be due to something in the set of fashions themselves--something within the structure of fashion, so to speak, at the time when the unsettling larger influences impinge on them (ibid.:19).

The intervening factor between the sociopolitical conditions and the correlating pattern fluctuations is the cultural basic dress pattern. Kroeber extends his caution, refusing to generalize from this correlation observed in American history to cultures of a different basic dress pattern. His position is that it would not "be sound to assert that we have here an invariable law of history. . . . Each historic case has to be analyzed in its own terms--its own modes of war and revolutions, its own manners or basic structure of fashion" (ibid.:23).

The value based theory of change finds expression also in a social-psychological work. In an article written in 1940 (Kroeber 1952:310ff), "Psychosis or Social Sanction," Kroeber concerns himself with the fundamental differences between "these primitives and ourselves." One way that this difference may be expressed is in terms of reality. While the primitive is able to distinguish the phenomena of his dreams from those observed by his five senses while awake, that seen in his dreams has a super-reality. With "us" the unreal or subjective existence of the content of dreams is recognized. Kroeber observes that this difference may be approached in terms of social acceptance rather than purely in terms of the definition of reality. That is, in modern American society, one who hears the dead speak is regarded as at least abnormal and possibly so unbalanced as to be dangerous. Among the Mohave and others this was a personality of "enhanced powers" that may be used for good or evil. A theory of change based on these variables is particularly applicable to the contact situation of Western and primitive cultures. Does enlightenment (diffusion of reality culture) cause the society to "withdraw prestige value from the vision?" Then as visions decrease they become "dubious assets" and finally are stigmatized by the society? Kroeber suggests that the opposite is more likely the case. That is, with the development technologically, in size, etc., society may attach less prestige values



to these dreams without first changing the definition of reality involved. Eventually this may continue until the social utility of them is lost. They then may come to be regarded as dangerous and eventually as abnormal. While Kroeber does not explicitly call attention here to his threefold classification of culture, the implicitly hypothetical explanation given is that the social culture provides the dynamic medium by which changes in the value culture effect changes in the reality culture. In this social psychological essay Kroeber has necessarily taken a more "micro" look at his phenomena. Though technological development and population growth due to contact may result in a change of values, it is the change of values that psychologically and culturally precedes fundamental changes in the reality culture.

The prior role of value culture is suggested again in a "macro" cultural level. The hypothesis is seriously entertained that the development of art tends to precede the development of other aspects of the culture. It is true that Kroeber utilizes this in more of a retrospective frame of reference than in one that is predictive for he says, "In short, the hypothesis based upon a precedent in the Old World, is that culture with a flourishing art would still be in the ascendent phase; one with a decaying or dead art, at its peak or in the descendent" (1944:226).

Change is held to be determined in that it is unidirectional and that it follows in the wave pattern of development as a culture moves toward the climax of its integration or configurational potential. These principles are observed by Kroeber on several levels of cultural analysis, i.e. total civilizations, national subdivisions of civilizations, and specialized subsets of culture such as philosophy or science regarded in terms of either civilizations or nations. However, it appears that determinism of wave pattern is observed primarily with reference to civilizations and never of the primitive culture--this, even though the culminations of culture growth among primitives is held to be the same as civilizations (Kroeber 1944:4, 5). The directional determinism of any particular culture is a unique characteristic of that particular culture as found in its style and perhaps, therefore, could only be ascertained after its development, hence not of predictive use to the anthropologist. Whether any such inherent differences in style potential could "take account of" the difference in the growth of civilizations and primitive culture is never made explicit. Neither is the value centered style concept used to give any description of the development of civilization from primitive cultures.

The theoretical position which the dynamics of value culture hold in the course of change may well be pertinent to Redfield's position that in primitive cultures the technological order is bound by the moral order while in civilizations it has burst these bonds. It must be remembered, however, that Kroeber followed Boas in a strong rejection of cultural evolution. On the other hand, he does compare primitive culture and civilization in a framework of four criteria of progress (1948:298-303). The first of these is in terms of reality but limited to the assumptions about reality, i.e. "In proportion as a culture disengages itself from reliance on these [magic and superstition] it may be said to have registered advance" (1948:298). The second centers around the value of human life which transcends "the obtrusion of physiological or anatomical considerations into social situations." The third concerns the superiority of the accumulative products of the reality

culture as in science and technology. While these are presented as universal criteria of progress, they cannot but be construed as being a part of the culture of Western man in greatest contrast to most primitive cultures.

Since Kroeber holds that the assumptions which underlie the approach to reality account for science developing in waves like all other value configurations or styles, we may see in these first two criteria of progress the fundamental value culture which precedes the third, the accumulations of reality culture. Kroeber, of course, made no such point. Yet, it would be within the theoretical framework that seems to run implicitly through his writings.

Style theory finds its development exclusively in terms of civilizations which are conceived largely as "a collection of styles" (Kroeber 1963:40). Each style has a "wave pattern" of development and together they tend toward a consistency among themselves. The central role that values play in Kroeber's theory is explicitly stated: "Styles are the very incarnation of the dynamic process of history. They are the most sensitive expression extant of culture change--its most delicate galvanometer" (1963:41). A question of theoretical concern remains: Why is this theory not developed with respect to the primitives' cultures? The hypothetical reasons that are suggested to the reader are that the assumptions which underlie the approach to reality and the basic values have the quality of the ultimate and therefore are not the basis for growth and development. Also, since the world view of the primitive is very much of one piece in a mythical framework there is no room nor need for development toward consistency. And finally, the integration of the primitive culture does not have a peak from which it then tends to decline.

This brief summary of Kroeber's ideas about culture change suggest the rich potential which may yet be mined for the further development of theory.

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