

## II. A Certain Inheritance: Nineteenth Century German Anthropology

In the context of Spencer and Gillen's work, and also that of Howitt (1904) for example, two questions should be posed of Carl Strehlow's text. First, how might one explain his lack of engagement with anthropological debates on the origins and evolution of indigenous Australians? Second, what explains Strehlow's quite particular focus on myth and song among the Aranda and Loritja when the work of his contemporaries tends to move, in a British vein, from origins, to social organisation, to rite?

Strehlow, it might be argued, had little contact with his British-Australian contemporaries. Neither Spencer nor Gillen rated the Lutheran Strehlow highly as a colleague or consultant. Gillen's interaction with Strehlow as a scholar was minimal. Spencer's dismissal of Strehlow's scholarship was advertised widely which Strehlow junior answered in his own masterwork, *Songs of Central Australia* (1971: xv, xvi, xx–xxxviii). In addition, Frazer's long list of consultants around Australia makes it clear that he chose Spencer as his Aranda source, not Strehlow. Perhaps then, Strehlow's text was simply the product of an isolated missionary, distant from professional or mainstream scholarship. Again, as a missionary bent on the task of conversion, possibly he was required to maintain a Christian humanism. Concern with the history or evolutionary stage of the lower human ranks could not sit happily with proselytising.

Strehlow was a missionary rather than an academic. However, he received his Christian education within the context of nineteenth century German humanism. Although the Lutherans sustained their own distinctive tradition of scholarship and missionary work, they were also part of a broader German intellectual milieu deeply influenced by historical particularism. The modern culture concept, and its repudiation of rationalist theories of universal human development, had its origins in this setting. In fact for Herder, himself a Lutheran pastor, the plenitude of human culture was also the plenitude of God's creation (see Darcy 1987). The two approaches dovetailed into one consistent humanistic approach. From this viewpoint, the central concerns of Strehlow's magnum opus were not accidental. His correspondence with von Leonhardi contains no suggestion that starting with oral literature was strange. To the contrary, it was natural simply because Strehlow and von Leonhardi shared an intellectual orientation that affirmed the status of language and literature, or oral text, as the key to a culture.

This chapter considers the emergence of nineteenth century German anthropology and its passage to the United States in the hands of Franz Boas.

Boas and Strehlow shared similar intellectual interests and a similar scholarly style. Following this account, I describe Strehlow's own education and the intellectual milieu of the German Lutheran seminary; and unpack the detail of Strehlow's correspondence with von Leonhardi. In their letters, a shared concern with language and empirical observations is evident. These are the three major influences on Strehlow, some quite direct and others more diffuse, that shaped the production of a unique Australian work. However, while this work was unique for its time in British-influenced Australia, it readily finds a place in the tradition of German historical particularism and its foundational role in modern (American) cultural anthropology.

## Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of *Volksgeist*

During the nineteenth century, a German tradition of anthropology<sup>1</sup> emerged that paid great attention to specific cultural configurations. According to this tradition, humanity was comprised of distinct cultures (*Kulturen*) and peoples (*Völker*) which were the products of individual histories and environmental milieux. This plenitude or plurality of human culture reflected, most immediately evident in particular languages, the universal creativity of groups and at the same time the unity of humankind.

The 'birth' of German anthropology may be seen in the light of the standoff or tension between two prominent intellectuals of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottfried Herder (Zammito 2002; Gingrich 2005: 65). Kant was a classic representative of the Enlightenment whereas Herder marked the beginning of the Counter Enlightenment in Germany, a movement called Romanticism. Although Kant was the first to use the word anthropology in his work for a new 'science of man', it was ultimately Herder who determined the course of German anthropology. Kant's relativism played a role only insofar as his idea of understanding phenomena on their own terms entered anthropological thought. Consistent with this view, people should be studied not to prove or disprove a theory, but rather because a scholar '[finds] them interesting' (Adams 1998: 296). In this sense Kant contributed to the cultural relativism and particularism of German anthropology (Adams 1998: 276–277). At the same time, Kant had the dubious honour of promoting the concept of race in intellectual life (Zammito 2002; Petermann 2004: 320). When Kant turned from general reflections on human thought and a 'cosmopolitan law' for all peoples to accounts of people and place, scholarship was pushed aside

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1 The meaning of this term was not well defined at the time. It encompassed what is known as ethnology and ethnography as well as aspects of other disciplines like physical anthropology to which it tended to cross over. In the late eighteenth century it was simply understood as 'the science of man' which was very broad and not well defined.

by other presumptions. As Harvey remarks, 'Kant's *Geography* is nothing short of an intellectual and political embarrassment' (Harvey 2001: 275). He cites the following passage, among others, from the *Geography*:

In hot countries men mature more quickly in every respect but they do not attain the perfection of the temperate zones. Humanity achieves its greatest perfection with the white race. The yellow Indians have somewhat less talent. The negroes are much inferior... (Harvey 2001: 275)

Herder, who rejected Kant's notion of race, provided instead crucial concepts that would determine the study of cultures. Many of Herder's pioneering concepts including both *Zeitgeist* and *Volksgeist* entered intellectual and anthropological discourse, without users being aware of their Herderian origins (Barnard 2003: 5, 108). Already in 1828, Goethe,<sup>2</sup> both foe and friend to Herder, observed that a number of Herderian ideas had become seminal; absorbed into the mainstream of philosophical and, ultimately, anthropological thought (Marchand 1982: 20).

Among many other disciplines, Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) complex oeuvre influenced the development of German anthropology in a lasting and profound way. His concept of *Volk*, a cultural group or entity, and *Volksgeist*, the essence of a cultural group that sets it apart from other groups, were the basis of his particularism, which was to become a central principle of nineteenth century German anthropology. He recognised that each culture possessed a moral and intellectual framework that determined its possibilities and its individual development. For Herder, language was the defining element of a cultural group and its identity, as it was in language that a people's *Volksgeist* is expressed (see Barnard 1969: 32).

For Herder there were no people without a culture (Barnard 1969: 24–25; Barnard 2003: 134). In his *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–91), he used the concept in the plural deliberately (Petermann 2004: 309). He professed to a humanity made up of a multiplicity and therefore rejected the notion of enlightenment as a pervasive developmental stage. Herder's idea that culture was a universal phenomenon was novel at a time when cultured and uncultured peoples were distinguished from each other. In contrast, he maintained that wherever people live together as a group over a period of time there is a culture (Barnard 2003: 134–135). In short, the universal human property he recognised was difference: the propensity of groups to specify themselves through culture.

The principles of the French Enlightenment, in which the universality of human reason across space and time, the subjection of uniform human nature to unchanging natural laws, the steady progress of civilisation through history

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<sup>2</sup> Goethe wrote in his memoirs *Dichtung und Wahrheit* that one of the most significant occurrences in his life was his acquaintance with Herder whom he had met by chance in the Gasthof zum Geist (Goethe 1998: 430).

toward an enlightened state of reason and the laws that governed these codes, were questioned by the Counter Enlightenment (Berlin 1980: 1–25). By rejecting the French dogma of the uniform development of civilisation, Herder argued for the uniqueness of values transmitted throughout history:

Herder sharply differs from the central thought of the French Enlightenment, and that not only in respects that all his commentators have noted. What is usually stressed is, in the first place, his relativism, his admiration of every authentic culture for being what it is, his insistence that outlooks and civilisations must be understood from within, in terms of their own stages of developments, purposes and outlooks; and in the second place his sharp repudiation of that central strain in Cartesian rationalism which regards only what is universal, eternal, unalterable, governed by rigorously logical relationships – only the subject matter of mathematics, logic, physics and the other natural sciences – as true knowledge. (Berlin 1976: 174)

Herder laid the foundations for German historical particularism, because he was interested in historical difference and in the differences between contemporaneous groups in different places (Adams 1998: 271). In his view, every cultural group was the product of its circumstances and could not be measured by the values of another group. He made it amply clear in his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* (1793–97) that European culture was not to be considered superior to any other:

Least of all must we think of European culture as a universal standard of human values ... Only a real misanthrope could regard European culture as the universal condition of our species. The culture of man is not the culture of the European; it manifests itself according to place and time in every people. (Herder cited in Barnard 1969: 24)

Herder attempted to free the assessment of the 'other' from imposed value systems and categories. He urged historical study of a culture and analysis of its own internal relations (Barnard 2003: 137). He projected a history of peoples of the globe in terms of their self-defining values and cultures (Fink 1993: 56). In 1774 he wrote: 'Each man, each nation, each period, has its centre of happiness within itself, just as every sphere has its centre of gravity' (Herder cited in Barnard 1969: 35). Thus, each human group could be understood only as a particular historical configuration. Each one of these in its individuality contributes to humanity as a whole and through language the intricacies of cultures could be understood. Herder wrote that to enter into the spirit of a people, to understand and share its thoughts or deeds:

... do not limit your response to a word, but penetrate deeply into this century, this region, this entire history, plunge yourself into it all and feel it all inside yourself – then only will you be in a position to understand; then only will you give up the idea of comparing everything, in general or in particular, with yourself. For it would be manifest stupidity to consider yourself to be the quintessence of all times and all peoples. (Herder 1969a: 182)

Herder's humanistic ideal, his *Humanität* (humanity), is one in which diverse cultures exist side by side (Berlin 1980: 11) and also together exhibit the essence of humanness involved in the potential for creativity and specificity. His concept of humanity was a unifying principle through which to formulate his understanding of human existence in the infinite variety of its configurations (Knoll 1982: 9). It was his universalist principle of *Humanität* that enabled him to fit his pluralist concept of humankind into his view that all humans were equal and had the same origin (homogenetic). He believed that the diversity of peoples had only developed in the course of time, rejecting all claims that man evolved from animal forms (Nisbet 1992: 10–11). From this unity of humanity he concluded that there are no superior cultures and condemned, for instance, colonialism and slavery.

He rejected the concept of race (Mühlmann 1968: 62) and stated that the term 'race' was not fit to be used in relation to humans, as it referred to a posited difference in origins that he repudiated (Barnard 1969: 41). Herder believed in homogenesis and thus saw humanity as a unity. In his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit (Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind)* (1784–91) he wrote that 'in spite of the vast realm of change and diversity, all mankind is one and the same species upon earth' (Herder 1969b: 283). Herder's view on humanity encompassed the plurality of mankind which made humanity up as a whole. He concluded:

In short, there are neither four or five races, nor exclusive varieties, on this earth. Complexions run into each other; forms follow the genetic character; and in toto they are, in the final analysis, but different shades of the same great picture which extends through all ages and all parts of the earth. Their study, therefore, properly forms no part of biology or systematic natural history but belongs rather to the anthropological history of man. (Herder 1969b: 284)

This passage was considered by Kant as truly indicative of Herder's intellectual shortcomings (Barnard 2003: 65).

In 1772, Herder published an epoch-making essay on the origin of language called *Über den Ursprung der Sprache (On the Origin of Language)*. This essay

had a tremendous influence on his contemporaries. It would also influence the development of anthropological and linguistic thinking (in hindsight marking the beginning of a modern philosophy of language). Although this essay already contained what would become one of Herder's most original contributions, his concept of pluralism evolving out of his thoughts on language (as languages are an expression of humanity's variability and multiplicity), his initial concern was different. His main intention was to counter Süssmilch's assumption that language was a direct gift from God and to deny 'Condillac's and Rousseau's theories which traced the emergence of human speech to animalistic origins' (Barnard 1969: 17). The Lutheran pastor Herder<sup>3</sup> did away with the view that language has a divine origin. Instead he introduced the idea of slow and gradual development of language 'from rude beginnings' (Sapir 1907: 110). Language for Herder was an organic product grown in time, determined by the history of each individual group. Every language was therefore unique, like its speakers. Each language expressed a particular culture in space and time.

Herder argued that language originated and developed from within the individual; that it was not the imitation of nature's sounds or a given act by God. His key concept in accounting for the development of language was 'reflection' – in which individuals arrive at awareness and recognition of the self. Through language the individual becomes at once aware of his selfhood and of his cultural identity (Barnard 1969: 7; see also Fink 1993: 54–55).

In Herder's view, language lies at the basis of being because there is no coherent thought without words. He believed that a people did not have an idea or concept for which there was not a word. Ideas are constituted through language (Frank 1982: 16). There is no thinking outside languages and human beings are historical because there is no language in the abstract detached from human beings. There are only historical languages placed in the real world, with specific characteristics which mutate through time (Burns 2002: 61). This view would be repeated by Boas' student, Edward Sapir. He expressed the view that 'thought is impossible without language, that thought is language' (Darnell 1990: 99) and thereby echoed Vico, Herder, the Humboldts and other German thinking on language.

For Herder the human condition was ever changing, constantly developing and altering in response to diverse historical needs and circumstances. The most important element for Herder in this dynamic process of human historical transformation was language (Whitton 1988: 151). Herder recognised that whether language had been used to write history or not, it constituted a history of a given culture at a given time and place with all its idiosyncrasies. He perceived language as perpetually engaged in the process of generating a new

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3 Herder held the highest position in the Lutheran Church at the court of Weimar.

self out of the old self (Frank 1982: 18). In Herder we find already the notion of language's constant change or flux.<sup>4</sup> Herder used the metaphor of organic growth to explain the permanent evolving of the nature of language (Marchand 1982: 26). He used 'organic' in the sense that that which is being transformed is assimilated and applied (Whitton 1988: 153). Through the historical transformation of a language, traditional concepts and beliefs are continually synthesised with those of new generations (Whitton 1988: 152).

The empirical investigation of language was for Herder the basis for understanding cultural life, because a people's innermost essence was inherent in their language and literature, including the oral literatures of indigenous peoples (Zammito 2002: 155, 159). The language, mythology and folksong of a people were particularly important because they were the highest form of expression and revealed the essence of a people, the *Volksgeist* – today the term *Geist* is more usual. Thus, indigenous text ranked high on the agenda of German nineteenth century anthropology. Language embodied a people and reflected their *Geist*. A group's *Geist* was manifest in language. Language defined human beings, making them human. For this reason, as Whitton observes:

As an attribute specific to human beings, language is seen by Herder as the central expression of a uniquely human, reflective consciousness. In developing language, individuals give shape to their inner conscious nature, formulating their ideas and preconceptions through reflections on their experience of the external world. (Whitton 1988: 151)

Herder believed that no greater misfortune could befall a people than to be robbed of their language. With language loss came the loss of their spirit.

Herder's unique particularism which at the same time embraced universalism infused the new nineteenth century science of man. Herder's insights were carried forward by others including the von Humboldts, Waitz, Bastian and Boas. Ultimately they would lead to the plural modern culture concept, and to forms of ethnographic method that privileged language and the text, including indigenous oral literature.

## Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) pursued Herder's thoughts on human cultural diversity and on the relation between language and culture (Barnard 2000: 48; Petermann 2004: 281). From 1791, he began to design and propagate a plan for a comparative anthropology (Mühlmann 1968: 65). In this anthropology,

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4 Sapir called it 'drift'.

he intended to deploy the methods of natural science, history and philosophy. The three approaches would converge (Reill 1994: 355). More specifically, Wilhelm's interest lay in combining linguistic research and philosophy in an empirical anthropological project (Trabant 1994: 210, 219–229).

His comparative approach in anthropology was built on two foundations: a view that humanity shared a common nature and that this nature was expressed in individual national characters. This range of nation-characters encompassed the entire human species. Documenting these characters was the empirical task of anthropology (Bunzl 1996: 22). Each national character was embodied in a totality of traditions: customs, religion, language and art. These outward manifestations revealed the degree of development in each group or nation. Since these achievements were specific to each national entity, they could not be compared to an external standard. Each deserved an unconditional respect. However, in Wilhelm von Humboldt's view, some nations had realised their potential to a greater degree than others. Not surprisingly Wilhelm's view was that European nations were among the more developed (Bunzl 1996: 22).

Wilhelm von Humboldt also elaborated and refined Herder's thoughts on language. For Humboldt language was the defining element of human life (Bunzl 1996: 29), and the embodiment of each people's soul (Burns 2002: 61). It was through language that a people expressed their worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and *Geist*. In his view, language is the single most important factor that determines human culture – both human beings' capacity for culture and their specific *Geist*. He focused on the different linguistic forms of diverse languages and the relation between language and cognitive structure (Losonsky 1999: ix). He chose language as his focus because in language national character expresses itself most fully. His idea of a comparative linguistic method for the empirical study of diverse languages was to lead to central developments in the study of culture (Bunzl 1996: 29).

At least in part this was due to the fact that he saw clearly that language was both a unifying element of humanity, and also a point of differentiation. He acknowledged the ability of the human mind to acquire different languages, enabling any individual to acquire numerous worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*). Wilhelm believed that different languages embody different types of psychological structures. These structures in turn shaped different views of the world (Bunzl 1996: 34). He regarded all languages as functionally equivalent, as no language had yet been found that was functionally or formally incomplete (Humboldt [1820] 1994: 12). Each and every language in his view was equally capable of expressing any conceivable idea; an opinion that he shared with both Jesuit and Lutheran scholars at the time. Thus, for Humboldt it followed that language is universal to humankind. The urge to speak, to use sound, to designate objects and connect thoughts is the subject of certain general laws that

are universal. In this sense, all human beings have the same language though their initial capacities are developed historically in diverse ways (Losonsky 1999: xii, xx; Foertsch 2001: 112–113).

Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that the study of the origins of language could only be ‘the object of futile speculation’ (Bunzl 1996: 34). His empiricism led him to emphasise that comparative linguistics offered no answers to questions beyond the realm of immediate experience. He rejected explicitly the notion that any known language offered a glimpse into the far past or origins of human communication. No language had been found that lacked grammar or that was so recent as not to be the product of the activities of many generations of speakers. In the spirit of Herder he refused to propose a uniform law for the development of languages.

Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), Wilhelm’s younger brother, was one of the most influential figures of his time in the field of natural science. In his *Kosmos* he tried to embrace ‘all individual phenomena in their totality’. His inclusion of human interpretation in his cosmography though, led him to make an explicit contrast between positivist approaches and his own. He emphasised an empirical approach to a natural world that included cultural phenomena (Bunzl 1996: 39). He believed that both the unity of humanity and the specificity of individual cultures had to be studied empirically. He hoped to reveal ‘the law of cosmic harmony’ by reducing the multiplicity of forms in the natural world to some general laws of variation (Koepping 1983: 70, 77).

Like his brother, Alexander was furiously opposed to deduction and classification established without empirical observations. Alexander von Humboldt demanded the thorough description of the physical reality of nature as the primary objective of his cosmography (Bunzl 1996: 38). In this task, he included ethnography as a strictly descriptive exercise. The beginning of German ethnography may possibly be traced to the ‘prodigious travels and explorations of Alexander von Humboldt between 1799–1829’ (Adams 1998: 290) and the Humboldts’ joint demands for empirical study of cultural phenomena.

Another crucial figure in the formation of nineteenth century German anthropology was Theodore Waitz (1821–1864), a philologist who maintained that humanity was homogenetic by virtue of the fact that all human beings had similar cultural and moral propensities (Petermann 2004: 429). He sought to integrate both the linguistic and natural science orientations that came from the Humboldts in an all-embracing project. Waitz produced an influential six volume work called *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* (1859–1872), parts of it appeared in English translation as *Introduction to Anthropology* (1863). His study was a response to the polygenist ideas advanced by various mid-nineteenth century writers. To prove homogenesis he confronted evidence

provided by physical anthropology with his own ethnological interpretations of culture. Amassing the data available on physical traits among all the world's peoples, 'Waitz demonstrated the constant blurring of purported lines of racial demarcation, asserting that this precluded the existence of truly distinct types – an argument that Alexander von Humboldt had previously made in his *Kosmos*' (Bunzl 1996: 45). Waitz echoed Herder's view in *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind* and would be echoed in turn by Boas in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

This psychic unity of humankind proclaimed by Waitz was fundamentally different from the French Enlightenment's universal rationality. Following Herder and the Humboldts, Waitz saw cognitive processes as diverse and always the product or result of particular histories. These forms differed in time and space and could not be reduced simply to a standard repertoire of rational reflection. At the same time, Waitz rejected any innate racial hierarchy in cultural achievement (Bunzl 1996: 46). He was a forerunner of Franz Boas's humanist relativism. Waitz criticised the racist and supremacist worldview of his French contemporary Arthur de Gobineau (a founding father of twentieth-century racism). He was 'the author to establish the monogenetic theory of a unified descent of races in German anthropology, a position on which Rudolph Virchow, Bastian and Boas would be able to build soon thereafter' (Gingrich 2005: 80).

However, Waitz was not without bias towards his own cultural group (Petermann 2004: 429). He assumed that people he identified as Caucasians had attained the highest form of culture, other peoples could also attain this given the right context. According to Streck (2001: 508), his achievement lies in his idea that all humans are encultured and thereby have the same potential to learn and develop.

During this period German philologists of the Romantic Movement, such as Schlegel and Bopp, were studying non-European languages and developing a great admiration for these other languages and cultures. They accompanied these studies with comparable ones focused on Europe's folklore (Gingrich 2005: 77). In this process German philologists began to develop a sense of German linguistic identity (Smith 1991: 61). At the same time, and under the influence of Herder, the Grimm brothers were pursuing systematic studies of folklore by collecting folktales and 'recovering' the essence of German culture, its *Volksgeist*. With these activities grew the view that the essence of a cultural group could be discerned in its mythology, folk tales and song. This interest in the traditional cultures of Europe was transferred to the so-called primitive peoples. Comparative mythology seemed to help trace the diversity in human unity. Myth and ritual as well as song became central to German anthropology.

Prior to these developments, the concept of culture and in particular the traditional philological concept of culture had been reserved for European societies;<sup>5</sup> for places where *Bildung*, the cultivation of a people, was clearly apparent in a written literature. For some time, classicists had been drawn to the study of 'primitives' for the contrasts that could be drawn between these groups and the Greeks and Romans, the 'cultured people' (Whitman 1984: 216). Now this traditional German philology exerted some influence on a nascent German anthropology with its own new interest in primitive life. The classicists were allies in a response to vulgar materialism that tried to apply natural scientific method to all fields of knowledge, and reduce all phenomena, including the cultural, to a single material substrate (Whitman 1984: 215–216). Barnard remarks that 'the development of theoretical ideas in linguistics has throughout the history of that discipline foreshadowed the development of related ideas in social and cultural anthropology' (Barnard 2000: 48).

By the late 1850s when Bastian returned from his first long trip (1850–1858) around the world he found that cultural scientists had opened up a new academic territory, the study of primitive life, and this was exactly the scope for Bastian's new science of man (Whitman 1984: 224).

## **Adolf Bastian and Rudolf Virchow: The psychic and physical unity of man**

The two most influential figures of nineteenth century German anthropology were Adolf Bastian (1826–1905), who established anthropology as an academic discipline in Germany, and Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), the leading pathologist and physical anthropologist at the time. Intellectually, they dominated the main institutional sites and ideological tendencies of German anthropology. They maintained that no one race or people was superior to any other and that humanity was based on psychic and physical unity (Evans 2003: 200). With Waitz, Bastian and Virchow ensured that the emerging discipline of anthropology in Germany would be based on the presumption of monogenesis (Streck 2001: 503; Massin 1996: 87).

These representatives of nineteenth century anthropology were opponents of race theory, the attempt to assert the primacy of a biologically defined 'race' in determining the shape of social and historical process. They publicly opposed the biological determinism of social Darwinism or evolutionism.<sup>6</sup> In 1880, for

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5 China, India and other literate societies were often also included.

6 There are different evolutionist positions: not all of them are based on biological determinism and polygyny. Sociocultural evolutionism, which can be understood as a proto-theory for comparison, has to be distinguished from Darwinian based evolutionism.

example, as the deputy of the Progressive Party in the *Reichstag*, Virchow rejected any kind of racism and challenged Bismarck himself, asking him to explain his position on anti-Semitism (Massin 1996: 89).

Virchow was the most influential and powerful physical anthropologist of nineteenth century German anthropology. He and the majority of his colleagues (Ranke, von Luschen, Kollmann) believed in the unity of the human species and argued that there was no physical evidence that one race was superior to another. Virchow's declared empiricism led him to regard Darwin's biologically-based evolutionist hypotheses as unproven (Massin 1996: 83). He also criticised social-cultural theorising based on biological determinism, pioneered by Herbert Spencer (Stocking 1987: 134–136, 141–142). Virchow made sure that no race theorist ever published a single line in any of the reputable German anthropological journals which he controlled directly or indirectly with Bastian and Ranke (Massin 1996: 93).

Bastian delineated and differentiated the field of anthropology/ethnology from a range of other disciplines. He held the first academic position in German anthropology and championed empirical observation (Koepping 1983: 3, 28). He was the founder of the Royal Museum for Ethnology in Berlin in 1886 and its director until his death in 1905.<sup>7</sup> He was also instrumental in establishing the Berlin Society for Anthropology, along with its journal, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, which became the most prominent German journal in the field (Adams 1998: 291; Penny 2002: 19).<sup>8</sup> To document the diversity of human life, Bastian spent 25 years recording ethnographic data and collecting material culture in the Americas, Asia, Australia and Africa as well as in Europe (von den Steinen 1905: 242). The end result was an oeuvre of unmanageable proportions. Bastian's salvage anthropology was driven by the conviction that most other cultures would vanish in the confrontation with the imperial European powers.

He put great emphasis on the collection of material culture, because in his view artefacts were the embodiment of ideas and the tangible expression of the diversity of humanity (Koepping 1983: 107). Material culture, filtered through European eyes and understanding, was seen as rich in historical significance and of great empirical value that went beyond the limitations of written records (Penny 2002: 26). Bastian's museum project initiated a collection frenzy that took hold of German anthropologists and ethnographers. Through the incredible mass of material culture accumulated from overseas, it was believed that humanity could be represented in museum spaces. These ethnographic museums were meant to be well-ordered institutions, and were intended to function as laboratories for the comparative analysis of human artefacts. It was

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7 Felix von Luschan succeeded Bastian as the museum's director in Berlin (Lally 2002: 77).

8 From Bastian and Virchow, Boas learned that intellectual influence had to be combined with institutional power.

thought that they would be the foundation of an inductive study of mankind, leading to fundamental truths about human character and development (Penny 1998: 159). Soon, however, museums were overflowing with material, collections became disorganised, and personnel unable to realise Bastian's and others' initial goals (Penny 2002).

The institutional achievements and legacy of Bastian are more obvious than his theoretical and intellectual influence. Although he produced a vast amount of ethnographic data and many publications, his main theoretical framework circled around the attempt to explain the unity of mankind (von den Steinen 1905; Ankermann 1926). At the heart of his theoretical approach lay three main elements: *Elementargedanken* ('elementary ideas' or 'thoughts'), *Völkergedanke* (folk thought or idea) and geographical province (Ankermann 1926: 223, 226; Koepping 1983; Penny 2002: 22–23). Bastian believed that human nature was uniform around the globe despite its ostensible diversity. This unity was captured in elementary forms of thought. These elementary ideas or thoughts, Bastian argued, were common to all human beings due to the psychic unity of mankind: '*Elementargedanken* were thus hidden behind humanity's cultural diversity – a diversity that was historically and geographically contingent. Understanding the unique context in which each culture took shape, Bastian stressed, was thus critical for gaining insight into the universal character of human being' (Penny 2002: 22). However, elementary ideas materialised in the form of unique folk thoughts (*Völkergedanken*) among each cultural group. These were the product of environment and the interactions between a particular people. The third element of Bastian's theory was the 'geographical province' in which a certain *Völkergedanke* was at home. Thus, there are as many *Völkergedanken* as there are geographical provinces (Ankermann 1926: 226).

In sum, every *Völkergedanke* is based on the same elementary thoughts, common to all people. Each *Völkergedanke* though is also dependent on an environment including social practices in concert with what Bastian called a 'geographical province'. Previously Herder, and later German diffusionists understood these factors as historical circumstance and immediate context. It was largely Bastian's interest in identifying these particular contexts in time and space that led Fritz Graebner to credit him with bringing indigenous peoples into history (Penny 2002: 22), although Gustav Klemm had already attributed history to non-European peoples in the first part of the nineteenth century (Rödiger 2001; Gingrich 2005: 79). However, Bastian's influence was certainly significant.

Bastian's view of humankind was closely related to Herder's. His *Völkergedanke* approximates Herder's *Volksgeist* and Wilhelm von Humboldt's national character or *Weltanschauung*. From Herder, Bastian also inherited the 'seminal notion' of language. These ideas were influential in his formulation of *Völkergedanke* (folk idea) or the collective representation(s) of a particular ethnic group (Koepping

1983: 55). He also underlined the issue of ethnography, of recording cultural particularity. This served to stress his view that there is no inherent difference between the thought of primitive and modern men:

The propensity is the same in both cases, and the elements are the same. The results of these thought processes, in the form of folk ideas or worldview, are diverse, but the formative and structural principles are the same. Bastian emphatically denied the superiority of the European value system or the possibility of measuring one against the other. (Koepping 1983: 54)

Bastian used the notion of psychic unity to explain some of the 'extraordinary similarities' that cultural groups could display even though geographically they were distant from each other. Because he believed that cultures evolved in similar ways due to the nature and workings of the human mind, he argued that independent invention rather than diffusion or direct cultural contact should explain similarity. This seemed the preferable path to positing forms of contact or influence where there was no proven historical record (Adams 1998: 293). Bastian's emphasis on the psychic unity of mankind or the primacy of collective consciousness as the moving principle for endogenous growth led to a controversy between advocates of independent invention and advocates of diffusion (Koepping 1983: 60). Bastian's main opponent was Friedrich Ratzel, a theoretical geographer and diffusionist.

Bastian's anthropology also stood in contrast with trans-Atlantic and Continental anthropology influenced by Lewis Henry Morgan, Herbert Spencer and E.B. Tylor, although he eschewed social evolutionism and as well as progressivism. In German anthropological circles a more general reaction against social Darwinism had emerged. Bastian, Waitz and Virchow opposed the biological presumptions in social Darwinism. These German anthropologists insisted that the development of a people's culture was something that should be understood with reference to their own particular history and environment. Moreover, the study of these specificities should be historically grounded.

Despite his admiration for Darwin's travels, Bastian found Ernest Haeckel's popularisation of Darwin's thought especially offensive (Penny 2002: 21; Streck 2006). Bastian even rejected reflection on the origin of man, maintaining that were the issue to be tackled, this could only occur following exhaustive empirical research and the considered use of induction. The prefix 'Ur-' was highly suspect to him (Petermann 2004: 535). Thus, he and most of his colleagues steered away from Darwinian theorising and distanced themselves from the race debate (Massin 1996). Bastian hoped, rather, to use extensive empirical research to the end of formulating uniform principles for the mental creations of mankind (Koepping 1983: 78). At the same time he warned explicitly of simplification and

generalisation resulting from notions of biological determinism in accounts of socio-cultural evolutionism. He drew on induction and empirical observation to avoid the classification of data according to predetermined categories, regarding schemes of classification as works in progress rather than definite models (Penny 2003: 93).

Bastian took human distribution across the earth as a given of natural life (Ankermann 1926: 226). He did not pursue an explanation of how this distribution occurred or of its particular features. This would be the task of the German diffusionist school.

## **Friedrich Ratzel and Fritz Graebner: German diffusionism**

German diffusionism acquired its impetus from Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), a German theoretical geographer. He was interested in the relationship between humans and their immediate environment. In 1882 Ratzel published his major work, *Anthropo-Geographie*. It was an attempt to formulate a general theory of the human geography that Alexander von Humboldt had envisioned, and to provide a comprehensive account of the world's various histories of the type that Bastian had in mind (Müller 1993: 210; Petermann 2004: 538). Ratzel tried to develop an approach in which the materials collected could be deployed to explain the multiplicity of humanity in terms of migration and diffusion across the globe (Barnard 2000: 50). He opposed Bastian's idea of independent invention, the explanation of similarities in terms of a psychic unity. Ratzel was not prepared to place that much weight on a shared human creativity. Rather, he argued that cultural similarities were due to diffusion through migration, while differences could be explained with reference to particular environments. Ratzel was peripheral to the dominant anthropological circle and sought ways to have an impact on the establishment in Berlin. Therefore he initially adopted Darwin's idea of natural selection. It seemed to have at least in part an environmental reference in its account of the diversity of species (Smith 1991: 141). However, later he abandoned this position due to the biological determinism and progressivism involved in social Darwinism. Ultimately he believed that mankind was a homogenetic species influenced by history (Petermann 2004: 542).

Ratzel proposed that the object of ethnological study should be historical. It should trace the movements of people and cultural traits across the earth's surface. The patterns of these past movements should be linked with similar phenomena in the present in order to predict the future (Smith 1991: 142). In this fashion, Ratzel thought, one might begin to understand origins as well

(Petermann 2004: 540–541). To study the processes of change in society and culture, the (early) histories of specific peoples had to be investigated and from this research historical laws inferred (Smith 1991: 145). In pursuit of his ideas, Ratzel too emphasised detailed empirical research.

Ratzel's theory was developed into an elaborate *Kulturkreislehre* (theory of culture circles) by German diffusionists who took up his objectives. Initially Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) extended Ratzel's ideas (Barnard 2000: 50; Müller 1993: 203–204). It was only in the 1920s, however, that Frobenius became influential when he returned from his African adventures to formulate his Paideuma-Theory and to found his institution for *Kultur-Morphologie*.<sup>9</sup>

Fritz Graebner (1877–1934) and Pater Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) elaborated on Frobenius' initial theory. Frobenius suggested that the diffusion of ideas occurred in successive waves from a few fixed points of special cultural creativity. This position set itself against social Darwinian views because it built on Ratzel's and Bastian's thought. It used ideas of diffusion and human creativity in concert. At the turn of the century, the *Kulturkreislehre* was emerging as the main anthropological theory in Germany. It found its footing in November 1904 when Graebner and Ankermann presented ground-breaking papers at a meeting of the Berlin Anthropological Society. Subsequently, the papers were published in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. This meeting is often said to be the birth place of the *Kulturhistorische Methode*, although only in the 1910s did the first major works appear (Hahn 2001: 137).

In the first decade of the twentieth century most theorising on the *Kulturkreise* and *-schichten* (culture circles and -layers) was undertaken in private letters or at anthropological gatherings. The leading theorists of the new school, Graebner and Schmidt, were still refining their ideas (Lowie 1937: 177), and others who would publish later on the subject were developing their methodological approaches or collecting data and material culture in the field. Only occasionally short contributions – works in progress – appeared in anthropological journals such as *Globus*, *Petermann's Mitteilungen*, *Anthropos* or *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*.

Work on migration waves and subsequent cultural 'layering' as well as culture circles took initially as its focus material culture, religion and marriage rules. Language appeared later in these studies, because comprehensive language studies barely existed, especially for Australia. Graebner focused on material culture in Oceania, including Australia; across the world he only compared cultures that seemed to be closely historically related.

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9 On Frobenius see Heinrich 1998 and Petermann 2004.

The first brief linguistic contribution on Australian language to support the *Kulturkreislehre* was written by Pater W. Schmidt in 1908.<sup>10</sup> He had began his comparative study of Oceanic languages in 1899. His research seemed to indicate diffusion of language through Oceania that was carried by waves of migration. Comparative linguistics at the time was accustomed to relating languages historically and then locating their speakers on time-lines of cultural development. The comparison and classification of language was believed to give insight into ethnic origins, migrations and prehistory (Hoenigswald 1974: 348). Interestingly, Schmidt had been in contact with Carl Strehlow's mentor, von Leonhardi, but not with Strehlow himself. Based on his linguistic evidence Schmidt declared, that the Aranda were not 'primitive'<sup>11</sup> and their culture was not an inferior early form as social Darwinists of the British Isles wanted to see them.

For Schmidt as well as Graebner and Foy,<sup>12</sup> the population of Australia was not homogeneous, but consisted of a number of layers of peoples and cultures who had migrated and partially amalgamated. Graebner (1905, 1911) speculated that cultures emerged from different places of origin and spread in phases over the globe. Graebner was proposing three layers.<sup>13</sup> His work was not based on empirical observation and he did not outline the limitations of his sources. Paradoxically he advocated meticulous and critical research and empiricism. His view on Australia was that the oldest layer of culture had come from Tasmania and then had spread across the entire continent. Von Leonhardi, who was abreast of all emerging theories in anthropology, communicated to Strehlow that it was believed that at least two further layers of culture had spread over this Tasmanite layer and had brought new cultural elements like totemism, the boomerang and the spear thrower to mainland Australia.<sup>14</sup> Schmidt (1908b: 869) suggested that a fourth layer originated in New Guinea that had covered large parts of Northern Australia including areas where Aranda was spoken. Schmidt believed that he had found evidence for this fourth layer in his study of language.

One obvious trait of a culture circle was language or a language group that helped to distinguish one circle from another, or suggested overlay and mixing. Language presented itself as a central medium for tracing a people's historical development and cultural connections. However, these directions in anthropological thought were in their infancy (Kluckhohn 1936). The theory of the emerging *Kulturkreislehre* was still very hypothetical and most details

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10 The first major work on the *Kulturkreislehre* and linguistics was Pater Schmidt's *Die Gliederung der Australischen Sprachen* published between 1912 and 1918 in his journal *Anthropos*, which he used scrupulously as his vehicle during his long academic life.

11 Schmidt (1908b: 866–901).

12 Dr. W. Foy was the director of the Cologne Ethnological Museum and Graebner's editor.

13 Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 2.3.1909.

14 Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 2.3.1909.

quite unclear at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Where Australia was concerned, for instance, the source of the two layers and waves of migration thought to overlay the Tasmanite stratum remained something of a mystery.<sup>15</sup> It was not even clear what particular features or 'traits' needed to be present in a culture circle to define it (Kluckhohn 1936: 138–139). This and other problems remained unresolved although Schmidt (1911: 1013) wrote in 1911 that his language studies corroborated Graebner's views on the composition and distribution of Oceanic culture circles. In general terms, diffusionism described some apparent patterns rather than presenting a coherent theory (Smith 1991: 151). The approaches of the main theorists of the *Kulturkreislehre*, like Ankermann, Graebner, Schmidt, Frobenius, Foy, Thomas and von Leonhardi were too diverse.

In 1911 Graebner's classic *Methode der Ethnologie* was published, as well as Boas' seminal works *The Mind of Primitive Man* and his introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. These works were milestones in the history of anthropology. They synthesised important aspects of an historical and language-based approach to research in the first decade of the twentieth century. This was also the year in which W.H.R. Rivers declared his conversion to diffusionism, though his writing was not yet directed towards a critique of the social evolutionism of his time (Langham 1981: 118–121). Later Rivers would make the first serious attack on nineteenth century evolutionism in England, leading rapidly to the emergence of English functionalism (Langness 1975: 51).

Graebner's diffusionism was based on deduction and suggested a general history of humankind. Notwithstanding his own recommendations, his work was not empirically grounded. In his crisp review of Graebner's work, Boas pointed this deficiency out and stated that concepts of diffusion and cultural transmission could not be applied to distances that spanned continents (Boas 1940: 295–304). Shortly after the publication of his book, on the eve of World War I, Graebner set sail for fieldwork in Australia, but on arrival he was interned in an Australian war camp (Petermann 2004). Although Graebner would be forgotten after the war in the rising tide of Nazism,<sup>16</sup> his futile trip to Australia into Strehlow's proximity draws attention to the intellectual milieu in which Carl Strehlow worked.

## **Strehlow in the mission and Boas in the academy**

An overview of nineteenth century developments in German anthropology almost immediately allows Carl Strehlow's magnum opus to fall into place. No anthropological theorist himself, he was kept to the empirical task by his editor

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<sup>15</sup> Von Leonhardi to Carl Strehlow, 2.3.1909.

<sup>16</sup> Only surviving in P.W. Schmidt's work.

Baron von Leonhardi's constant queries, Strehlow's work makes sense within the context of his German predecessors and particularly his contemporary, Boas, who, unlike Strehlow, became a professional in the academy in the United States.

In the first instance, Strehlow's respect for Aranda and Loritja people, his certainty that their intellects equalled his own, was in accord both with his theological training and with the presumptions of German historical particularism. Although a clear formulation of a plural culture concept would await the emergence of Boasian anthropology in the United States, Strehlow showed respect for another technologically limited culture and carried the nascent assumption of plural cultures across the globe; the same nascent concept that resided in the work of Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Bastian. Consistent with this position, Strehlow simply assumed a homogenetic humankind. Certainly, his theology promoted the view, also endorsed by Humboldt, that any culture and language could express any conceivable idea. Although he laboured in his task of Christian conversion, Strehlow reported high god beliefs among the Aranda and Loritja. In an ironic way perhaps, and one that Spencer would not have understood, this aspect of Strehlow's ethnography reflected his commitment to plural cultures. Central Australian cultures like European ones were, in his view, open to the full range of human possibility. Both Herder and Strehlow used a theory of plenitude to explain a multiplicity of cultures rather than polygenetic theory. Boas would later begin the task of supplying this theory of plenitude with a basis in symbolic imagination rather than theology. Contemporaneous multiplicity would be explained not by spurious biology, or appeals to God's creation, but rather in terms of the multiple forms of representation that human beings can create – mainly through language.

Noting the impact that Herder had on the Grimm brothers, and the central role of studies in myth and language in an evolving German tradition, Strehlow's initial focus is also not surprising. He collected assiduously and carefully translated numerous examples of Aranda and Loritja myth and song. He tried to classify this material according to the Grimms' categories – *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen* (myths, legends and fairy-tales). Clearly inadequate to the task of a modern anthropological interpretation of myth, it nevertheless shows Strehlow's engagement with a genre of nineteenth century German thought that saw the key to a culture in oral text. Almost without reflection perhaps, Strehlow sought to record phenomena that would provide most ready access to a *Volkgeist* (Herder) or a *Weltanschauung* (Humboldt). The fact that this German tradition saw language study as a *sine qua non* of the empirical focus that they recommended, may possibly explain the role that Strehlow's Aranda and Loritja dictionary had in his own research. This extraordinary compilation that grew to vast proportions only to remain unpublished was perhaps evidence of the

missionary's serious scientific intent. Consistent with both the German and Lutheran humanistic tradition from which he came, this compilation of language would be the ultimate and definitive route to central Australian cultures.

Finally, Herder's view that the greatest misfortune for a people would be to lose their language also throws interesting light on Strehlow's German-to-Western Aranda translations. His initial translation of the bible was an unusual achievement. Also interesting though, was his Aranda primer written for school children. *Pepa Aragulinja: Aranda Katjirberaka* was published posthumously in 1928. It contained the elements of Aranda literacy along with a small collection of bible stories and Lutheran hymns in Western Aranda.<sup>17</sup> Strehlow quite literally grasped Aranda culture in the act of translation. There could be no greater testimony to the importance of language study than his pioneering work.

There is little evidence in Strehlow's work of great engagement with Graebner's and Schmidt's ideas about multiple cultural layering. However, Wilhelm Schmidt's exchange of letters with von Leonhardi brought Strehlow into contact with diffusionist thought. Like Boas, Strehlow was interested in small-scale regional diffusion. It is possible that he chose to record both Aranda and Loritja myth noting differences in theme engendered by natural environment under the influence of the German diffusionists. His observations on geography also seem to recall Ratzel, and make an interesting link with T.G.H. Strehlow's observations on environment and social structure in different regions of arid Australia (Strehlow 1965). Carl Strehlow certainly had a sense of regional cultures. It is notable that as W.H.R. Rivers moved through diffusionism and towards functionalism in his studies of kinship terminology, Strehlow was developing a sense of culture area studies that had a resonance both with Graebner and Boas. Strehlow also collected material culture, in which he may have been responding indirectly to the priorities set by Bastian which seem to have reached every corner of the globe. Governed by their own tenets of empiricism, there was undoubtedly a view that in some sense or other the material object carried truth – something eternally retrievable for further research and also the counterpoint to a central focus on language.

Strehlow's major text was in one sense the product of a lonely missionary scholar in remote Australia. Placed in the intellectual tradition from which both Strehlow and his mentor came, however, his magnum opus mirrors in a striking way the anthropological concerns in the Germany of his time.

Thus, another way in which to position Carl Strehlow's intellectual endeavours is to juxtapose them with his contemporary, Franz Boas (1858–1942). Boas migrated from Germany to the United States and would become the founder of North

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17 The work was published by the Finke River Mission in Adelaide with the co-operation of Auricht's Printing Office, Tanunda, South Australia.

American cultural anthropology. Initially he studied physics and geography, taking his doctorate in 1881 from the Kiel University in Germany. He began to travel between Germany and the United States, developing a lifelong interest in west coast Native American groups and especially in the Indian groups of British Columbia. By 1886, Boas had an appointment in geography at the University of Berlin and maintained an association with Bastian's Museum of Ethnology. His later interests in museums, collecting and in the human unconscious in culture likely stemmed from this association. Silverman writes that Boas 'transposed the notions of Bastian and Rudolph Virchow to his treatment of culture in the American context' (Silverman 2005: 260). In 1892, Boas was instrumental in the founding of Chicago's famous Field Museum and from there moved on to the Museum of Natural History in New York (Bohansan and Glazer 1988: 82). At this time, he also delivered lectures at Columbia University. This would be a lifelong association; a base from which Boas would train numerous prominent anthropologists including Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Edward Sapir. Carl Strehlow's affinities both with a nineteenth century German tradition, and with the anthropology that Boas would develop are clear. The following account focuses on three central areas: Boas' field-based anti-evolutionism, his focus on language as a key to culture and, finally, his use of culture-area studies, a refined and empirically focused diffusionism.

Although this discussion juxtaposes Strehlow's immersion in the field to Boas' engagement with the academy, Boas was also an assiduous fieldworker. The injunctions of Bastian, Graebner and others to a disciplined empiricism were realised in Boas' professional practice. As Stocking proposes, Boas was the person who, in the United States, founded a modern fieldwork discipline. He was deeply rooted 'in the intellectual traditions of his homeland' (Stocking 2001: 26) and transformed 'a museum and government-based inquiry into an academic discipline in which "culture" replaced "evolution" as a dominant paradigm' (Stocking 2001: 1). Boas' anthropology was well informed by his predecessors in the German tradition. The cosmographic approach of Alexander von Humboldt is evident in his writings as well as Wilhelm von Humboldt's language project (Boas 1940: 639–647; Bunzl 1996). He had a good understanding of Herder, Kant and other classic German thinkers through his education at a German gymnasium (Liss 1996: 155–184; Cole 1999: 280). Like his colleagues of the *Kulturkreislehre*, he did not believe in racial or biological determinism or linear development of societies in which peoples could be arranged according to evolutionistic sequences.

During his sojourn in Berlin, Boas also formed a lifelong friendship with Virchow. From him Boas learned quantitative method and also became an expert in physical anthropology amassing anthropometric data to prove that no grounds existed to discriminate against any group of people on the basis

of physical difference (Boas 1940; Petermann 2004; Synnott and Howes 1992: 154). In his work he approached the question of races from diverse angles, each time reaching the conclusion that there was no conclusive evidence regarding physical traits to establish a diversity of race. Boas found that 'differences were not great enough to allow living men to be placed on different evolutionary stages' (Stocking 1968: 220).

Empiricism and quantitative method initially determined his approaches to the new discipline. However, the fieldwork experience itself seems to have been the crucial one for Boas. According to Lévi-Strauss, he 'became aware of his anthropological vocation during the course of his first field work, as a result of a flash of insight into the originality, uniqueness, and spontaneity of social life in each human group'. Thus, while Boas sought to apply to the subjective world the 'rigorous methodology that he had learned in the natural sciences, he recognized the infinite variety of historical processes which shapes [the subjective] in each case' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 8). As Boas proceeded in his work, language and history became increasingly important in his interpretation of human multiplicity. In the late 1880s, Boas wrote that his method was to inquire into the peculiarities of single tribes through a thorough comparison of language, customs, and folklore. His historical analyses were focused on issues of inheritance and borrowing. In his view, it was crucial to evaluate and distinguish what was original and what was borrowed in customs and folklore as well as in language (Stocking 1968: 206). Cultures were the product of numerous elements coming together from a range of factors in a region. Therefore, they could never be a simple matter of linear progression from one stage to the next.

Because his work was empirical with a small area focus, Boas was led to the view that each culture has its own 'logic', and its own particularity. Ultimately, his view was relativistic and a product of the tradition from which he came. In an interesting comment, that bears on Carl Strehlow's work as well, Darnell remarks that 'Boas' emphasis on descriptive ethnology in a historical context, later criticized as atheoretical, was itself part of a consistent methodology based on an explicit theoretical commitment' (Darnell 1998: 290). For example, in his descriptive work on *Primitive Art* published in 1927, Boas weaves the repudiation of speculative theory regarding origins into his comments on style:

I doubt very much that it will ever be possible to give a satisfactory explanation of the origin of these styles, just as little we can discover all the psychological and historical conditions that determine the development of language, social structure, mythology or religion. All these are so exceedingly complex in their growth that even at best we can do no more than hope to unravel some of the threads that are woven

into the present fabric and determine some of the lines of behaviour that may help us to realize what is happening in the minds of the people.  
(Boas [1927] 1955: 155)

This developing fieldwork method fed into Boas' rejection of nineteenth century evolutionism and its notions of sequenced developmental stages. Boas criticised the premature classification of superficially similar phenomena that may be the product of quite different regional histories (Stocking 1968: 205). It was these concerns that produced one of his most famous essays, written in 1896, *The Limitations of the Comparative Method in Anthropology* (Boas 1940: 270–280). By 'comparative method' he meant 'the specific procedures followed by the evolutionists' (Silverman 2005: 261). In this essay he denounced the evolutionary assumptions that dominated the English-speaking world. By noting that ostensibly similar phenomena are not always due to the same cause, Boas was undermining the approach of independent invention and evolutionary sequencing.<sup>18</sup> In this famous article, a nascent sense of the modern culture concept began to emerge. In criticising 'the comparative method' as it was understood within evolutionism, Boas was pointing not simply to particularism but also to contextual specification; to the variable meaning or significance of a thing or practice within varying historical contexts (Sahlins 1976: 67; Bohansen and Glazer 1988: 84). He argued that the same phenomenon, a mask for example, does not always have the same meaning and may well have developed out of very different contexts (Sahlins 1976: 68).

According to Stocking, 'what was actually at issue was not simply the general evolution of culture but the extrapolation of evolutionary stages in every area of cultural life – the presumed sequences of art forms, of marriage forms, of stages in the development of myth, religion, and so forth' (1968: 211). Boas focused on the fundamental historicity of cultural phenomena, and on the ability of cultures to assimilate and also innovate with newly acquired material. In this he stood in marked contrast to the evolutionists who tried to arrange all peoples of the world in stages of a linear development according to predictable laws with a predictable outcome. Once again, the very different views that Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow held on Aranda people conform with this divergence. Where Spencer saw inevitable decline, Strehlow as missionary and nascent historicist, saw innovation and a future.

Boas' critique of evolutionism rested on his German historical particularism; on an appreciation of the historically conditioned plurality of human cultures. This position also allowed him to engage other ideas concerning notions of *Volksgeist* and, most importantly, the centrality of language in culture. Language

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<sup>18</sup> At the basis of the critique of independent invention were his view of causality and classification (see Stocking 2001).

was central in Boas' work for a number of reasons. Like other early German anthropologists, he believed that language was something that belonged to every human group. There were no inferior languages. He saw language as one of the routes to unravelling the history of indigenous peoples and traditional worldviews, because 'the history of language reflects the history of culture' (Boas 1940: 631). In the introduction to his *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911), Boas stated clearly that it was paramount for the student of American Indian cultures to know the language of the people studied, to be able to grasp the essence of that particular culture (see also Stocking 2001: 72), although he acknowledged that 'the practical difficulties in the way of acquiring languages are almost insuperable':

Nevertheless, we must insist that a command of the language is an indispensable means of obtaining accurate and thorough knowledge, because much information can be gained by listening to conversations of the natives and by taking part in their daily life, which, to the observer who has no command of the language, will remain entirely inaccessible. (Boas 1911: 60)

In view of these remarks, one cannot but summon the image of Carl Strehlow's more than 20 years in 'the field'. In addition, Boas argued that text collection in original languages was essential for ethnography and a foundation for further research. Boas wrote that 'no translation can possibly be considered as an adequate substitute for the original' because:

The form of rhythm, the treatment of the language, the adjustment of text to music, the imagery, the use of metaphors, and all the numerous problems involved in any thorough investigation of the style of poetry, can be interpreted only by the investigator who has equal command of the ethnographical traits of the tribe and of their language. (Boas 1911: 62)

Language knowledge was the pre-condition for meaningful ethnographical research, but at the same time language was also in itself an ethnological phenomenon (Boas 1911: 63). Just as language mirrors a culture, 'the peculiar characteristics of languages are clearly reflected in the views and customs of the peoples of the world' (Boas 1911: 73).

Boas was particularly interested in folklore, meaning the body of customs and traditions of a society that were largely stored in mythology, and thereby in the language and texts of a people. It was this complex that determined culture rather than biology or race. Language and mythology were possible sources of data on migrations. They revealed customs which were often hidden or extinct and provided a way to trace the history of a people. Most important though, the folklore of a people reflected their *Volksgeist* or *Weltanschauung* (Stocking

1968: 223). The mythology of a people provided the best material for evaluating beliefs and practice as well as the ethical and aesthetical values of a culture. Folklore and mythology were the key to a people's particularity.

Text or oral literature (myths and tales as well as related traditional laws and customs) were therefore immensely important to Boas. Developing his argument against racially-based mental differences, Boas suggested that the minds of humans shared similar powers of abstraction, inhibition and choice. Their particular manifestation, however, was shaped by the body of custom and traditional material that was transmitted from one generation to the next. Much of this was unconscious, like the hidden complex morphological or grammatical categories and structures of language. The behaviour of all humans was the result of a body of habitual behavioural patterns of the particular culture in which they live (Stocking 1968: 220–222).

Lévi-Strauss wrote that Boas must be given credit for defining more lucidly than ever before the unconscious nature of cultural phenomena. By comparing cultural phenomena to language in this regard, Boas anticipated both the subsequent development of linguistic theory and a future for anthropology. He showed that the structure of a language remains unknown to the speaker until the introduction of scientific grammar (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 19). Boas wrote:

It would seem that the essential difference between linguistic phenomena and other ethnological phenomena is, that the linguistic classifications never rise to the consciousness, while in other ethnological phenomena, although the same unconscious origin prevails, these often rise into consciousness, and thus give rise to secondary reasoning and to reinterpretation. (Boas 1911: 67)

These were Boas' primary and secondary rationalisations that pointed to the taken-for-granted in culture and juxtaposed it to conscious elaborations of meaning; different dimensions of culture with different degrees of stability (see also Ogden and Richards 1946).

Boas accepted diffusion but not the grand patterns of Graebner's approach (Adams 1998: 294). In Boas' view, diffusionist accounts were useful only when applied to small areas where empirical research was possible and allowed comparison. Only detailed studies of phenomena would be able to shed light on how cultures evolved through time. The thorough study of local phenomena in a well-defined, small geographical area would bring the histories of individual cultures alive. Boas offered a critique of generalising approaches in his essay, 'Review of Graebner, "Methode der Ethnologie"' which he included in *Race*,

*Language and Culture* (Boas 1940: 295–304). He emphatically rejected Graebner's method because, ultimately, Graebner fell back on generalised notions of historical development. Boas concluded:

Thus it seems to me that the methods of Mr Graebner are subject to the same strictures as those of the other schools, and the "Ferninterpretation" (remote interpretation), "Kulturkreise" and "Kulturschichten" must be considered as no less hypothetical than the "Stufenbau" of Breysig or the sequences of Lamprecht (Boas 1940: 303).

Boas' views on diffusionism were influenced by his studies of myth. He had gained a detailed sense of the ways in which culture contact within a region could result in forms of borrowing that re-shaped myth (Darnell 1998: 279). Therefore, in Boas' view, it is never easy to arrive at origins, to discern how 'foreign material [is] taken up by a people and modified by pre-existing ideas and customs' (cited in Stocking 1968: 207). Myths were the result of complex historical growth combining elements from various sources, thus a product of diffusion and amalgamation. For Boas, human creativity was expressed in the imaginative manipulation and reinterpretation of elements provided by a tradition, or borrowed from proximate others (Stocking 1968: 226).

The Boasian style of analysis therefore stressed territorial contiguity and the reshaping of traits within a limited historical area over time (Darnell 1998: 188). Comparison was only possible in a small area in which the elements were comparable. Sometimes recent borrowing could not be distinguished from a common origin, but neither 'stages' of development nor 'layers' of culture had much explanatory value for Boas (see also Darnell 1998: 217). He thought it very unlikely that whole culture blocs would travel over vast areas virtually unchanged, which was the prevalent belief of German diffusionists of the *Kulturkreislehre*. His diffusionism is sometimes termed, *der verfeinerte Diffusionismus*, 'the refined diffusionism' (Szalay 1983: 33).

Boas' position seems consistent with Strehlow's approach to his research with Western Aranda and Loritja people. It seems likely that the convergence in style of these two transitional anthropologists in the German tradition came mainly through a diffuse humanistic tradition, an interest in history and language, and in a shared admiration for diligent empiricism. Strehlow, missionary in the field, and Boas, doyen of the American academy, had a similar style.

## Concluding remarks

In summary, nineteenth century German anthropology and ethnology was a humanistic endeavour that tried to understand different peoples and cultures in

their own right without comparing them with others. As a result the theoretical and ideological orientation of German anthropology was monogenetic, anti-racist, particularist and historical (viz. focused on area studies and small-scale diffusion). In the hands of scholars including Boas and Strehlow, this meant that their ethnographic work was more often than not descriptive and did not present explicit and developed general theoretical insights. Owing to his place in the academy, Boas, however, drew out the implications of his position in considerable detail and also provided his reasons for rejecting other positions.

German nineteenth century anthropologists challenged eighteenth century progressivism that proposed a linear succession for humanity in time and space from one stage of development to the next, culminating in enlightenment. They were also opposed to nineteenth century evolutionistic thought that was based on biological determinism and which arranged peoples on a scale of different stages of mental and social development. Social Darwinism was seen as highly speculative and hypothetical, based on vulgar forms of deduction. German historical particularism also carried with it an emphasis on empirical research which encouraged the study of language. Especially with Boas, language rather than biology became the crucible of human difference. Thus, contrary to common perception, nineteenth century German anthropology was anti-racist and monogenetic nearly to the eve of World War I. The majority of German anthropologists rejected any kind of human difference based on race and professed the unity of humankind. This was the diffuse formative milieu in which both Boas, and Strehlow (guided by von Leonhardi), pursued their respective works.

Carl Strehlow was conducting his research in the first decade of the twentieth century, before Boas and Graebner published their seminal works in 1911. Strehlow concluded his research in 1909 which means that his study of language and myth was pursued in a 'pre-modern anthropological' framework phase of modern anthropology – at a time when Boas was still trying to detail his position. Carl Strehlow could not have read Boas' *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, for instance, prior to the publication of his own work. Strehlow shared with Boas and his circle, the nineteenth century German tradition: a commitment to empirical research, a strong focus on language and myth and an interest in small-scale diffusion as well as an aversion to evolutionism involving biological determinism. This is the intellectual milieu into which Strehlow's *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* fits. Both Boas and Strehlow were drawn to language and myth, and produced dense records of field material. Strehlow's *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* is descriptive ethnography that, in Sahlins' terms, allowed indigenous Australians to 'speak for themselves' (Sahlins 1976: 76). With this in mind, Strehlow was almost certainly 'interested in ethnography as an end in itself' (Adams 1998: 295).

Nevertheless, it seems that Strehlow, and his German contemporaries, had a good sense of the cultural multiplicity that would be the focal interest of a modern, professional anthropology. The making of a 'plural culture concept' is foreshadowed throughout the German tradition. The plural of the term culture appears in North America with regularity only in the first generation of Boas' students around 1910 (Stocking 1968: 203). Boas did not arrive at the point where he could finally show, despite his massive detailed research on the particularity of individual cultures, patterns and structures that allowed a society/culture consistency over time. Boas did not go beyond the plural of culture; patterns and structures of cultures would be left to his students. Kroeber would develop a concept of the superorganic, Ruth Benedict would write *Patterns of Culture* and Lévi-Strauss would tackle structures of the unconscious, for example. Boas' programme exceeded a lifetime, like the Humboldts or Bastian, he would not be able to conclude his project.

Surveying the conceptual genealogy of nineteenth century anthropology, it seems that Herder's *Volksgeist*, Humboldt's national character and *Weltanschauung*, and Bastian's *Völkergedanken* are only variations on a theme that echoes Herder's concept of *Humanität* and his idea of cultural diversity and pluralism.

The theology of Carl Strehlow finds a curious precedent in Herder's thought. Darcy observed, that Herder had adopted the Platonist concept of the Great Chain of Being, 'an imaginary link starting with God and descending through the angels to man and onto the animal world' (Darcy 1987: 7). In fact, Darcy writes:

Herder expanded the chain to include a "chain of cultivation". Humankind became a differentiated totality of cultures all equally attached to the Godhead. The potential in such a philosophical system is clear: once the links to the Godhead were removed, Herder's intellectual system would become simply an apprehension of the multiplicity of human cultures. (Darcy 1987: 10)

Boas was ensconced in the academy while Strehlow remained in the church. Both, however, were grounded in the German tradition: a unique combination of universalism and particularism with the desire for empirical research and the acceptance of human diversity.