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"If there is nothing beyond the organic ...": Heredity and Culture at the Boundaries of Anthropology in the Work of Alfred L. Kroeber

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Abstract

When, in turn-of-the-20th-century America, Alfred L. Kroeber continued the work of Franz Boas, in establishing anthropology as an academic discipline in the US, he defined culture as a phenomenon sui generis. For this he asked geneticists to enter into a coalition against hereditarian thoughts prevalent at that time in the US. To goal was to make room for anthropology as part of academia and distinct from other disciplines. To this end, he crossed the boundary to biology in order to build the boundary and developed the concept of culture in close connection to the concept of heredity: culture as independent of biological heredity (culture as superorganic) and, at the same time, culture as heredity of another sort. I will first summarize the shifting boundaries of anthropology at the beginning of the 20th century. I will then present Kroeber's ideas on culture and show how the changing landscape of concepts of heredity influenced his views. The historical case serves to derive two general conclusions: that the concept of culture can play different roles in explaining human existence; that genetics and the concept of hard inheritance did not have an unambiguous unidirectional historical effect on the vogue of hereditarianism at that time; on the contrary, it helped to establish culture in Kroeber's sense.

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