

On the Role of Fritz Graebner in the Development of Historical Ethnology*

HISTORICAL ETHNOLOGY in some ways may be traced back to Darwin. That sounds strange, since in Graebner's writings, as well as in Father Schmidt's, frequent attacks on „evolutionism“ are found¹. Yet, there is no contradiction here. What Graebner and Schmidt attacked was neither Darwin nor Darwinism, but „unilinear evolutionism“ in *ethnology*, namely the 19th century assumption that culture everywhere had progressed through the same stages, from primitive to higher culture, finally reaching the summit of „our advanced civilization“.

That belief was considerably older than Darwin. It found its clearest expression in a lecture on universal history delivered by Friedrich Schiller at the University of Jena in 1789². Graebner, correctly, stressed that the idea of evolution had originated in historical studies and only from there found its way into the natural sciences in general, and into biology in particular³. However, we here encounter a linguistic difficulty. The English language has two different terms for which the German language has only one; for both „evolution“ and „development“ the German speaker uses the same word „Entwicklung“. The confusion, particularly in translation, can be considerable.

Anyhow, the notion of *change* (to use a term so broad that it may cover both „evolution“ and „development“) first became accepted in history, long before Darwin. The assumption that the belief in „cultural stability“ was basic for Graebner's work⁴ is as ludicrous as if one were to claim that Darwin had believed in the unchanging stability of species.

Although Graebner, as far as I can find out, was not aware of it, there are two lines of thought leading from Darwin to Graebner:

1. The first is connected with the name of Moritz Wagner⁵ (October 3, 1813—May 31, 1887). Who, today, has ever heard of that man? Yet, a hundred years ago, Moritz Wagner not only was famous but his theories were considered so convincing that Wagner's name became hyphenated with that of Darwin; at that time reference was made to the „Darwin-Wagner-theory“. Wagner had

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1. Fritz Graebner, *Methode der Ethnologie*. Heidelberg 1911, p. 77 ff., 105; Wilhelm Schmidt, *Handbuch der Methode der kulturhistorischen Ethnologie*. Münster 1937, p. 9—11, 207—209; Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology*. New York 1939 (translation of the „Handbuch“), p. 10—12, 226—228, see also p. 361.

2. Friedrich Schiller, *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?* A recent translation in *History and Theory*, vol. 11 (1972) pp. 321—334. See also James Slotkin, *Readings in early anthropology* (Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology. No. 40.). Chicago 1965, pp. 384—385.

3. Graebner, *Methode*, p. 77.

4. See e.g. Josef Haeckel, *Zum heutigen Forschungsstand der historischen Ethnologie*, p. 23. In: *Die Wiener Schule der Völkerkunde*, edited by J. Haeckel, A. Hohenwart-Gerlachstein, and A. Slawik. Horn and Vienna 1956, pp. 17—90. Also, referring to Haeckel, Schlesier in: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. 82 (1957) p. 277.

5. See also *Anthropos*, vol. 58 (1963) p. 4.

claimed that „natural selection“ could not be explained exclusively by the „struggle for life“ resulting in the „preservation of favored races“⁶ but must be explained also, or even primarily, by *migrations* of organisms. Migrations would have led either to a selection of those organisms which were better adapted to the new environment or would have resulted in separating a group of organisms from those which remained in the old habitat and which may have differed slightly from those which had left⁷. Wagner thus, in some fashion, anticipated what, some hundred years later, was called genetic drift.

Moritz Wagner had travelled widely from 1836 to 1860 in Algeria, the coastal areas of the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, Armenia, Kurdistan, Persia, North and Central America, the West Indies, and in the Andes mountains from Panama to Ecuador. In 1860 he became professor of geography and ethnology at the University of Munich and Director of the Munich Ethnographic Museum. Ratzel, more than 30 years younger than Wagner, also had travelled widely for many years. Beginning with December 1871 (until 1886, when he became professor at the University of Leipzig) Ratzel's relationship with Wagner grew to be so close and constant that he thanked him publicly for the „good fortune“ of having been able to „discuss nearly every plan and to exchange nearly every thought“ with the man whom he called his „greatly admired, fatherly friend“. Ratzel stated that his „*Anthropogeographie*“ which he dedicated to Wagner should be attributed first of all to the suggestions and the stimulation which he had received from Wagner to whom (in Ratzel's words) the world owes tremendous gratitude „for the fertile thought of the theory of migration“⁸. Ratzel continued by stating that many passages in his book of 1882 go back to the years of 1872 and 1873 when he was privileged to contemplate with Wagner how to apply Wagner's theory to the phenomena of ethnology. Then Ratzel stated that his book originated in the need to treat systematically and precisely the problems of those parts of the disciplines of history and geography which overlap, and that he hoped his book would enable the young scholar to connect geographical with historical data.

„At every step I felt how my admiration of your mind increased, together with my gratitude for the innumerable suggestions and the stimulation which

6. The full title of Darwin's famous book reads: *On the Origin of Species by means of natural selection or the preservation of favored races in the struggle for life*.

7. Moritz Wagner, *Die Darwinsche Theorie und das Migrationsgesetz der Organismen*. Leipzig 1868; id., *Über den Einfluß der geographischen Isolierung und Kolonienbildung auf die morphologischen Veränderungen der Organismen*, Munich 1871; id., *Die Entstehung der Arten durch räumliche Sonderung*. Basel 1889. See also Friedrich Ratzel on Moritz Wagner in: *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*. 1896, vol. 40, pp. 532—543.

8. Friedrich Ratzel, *Anthropo-Geographie oder Grundzüge der Anwendung der Erdkunde auf die Geschichte*. Stuttgart 1882, pp. V—VIII; Later editions: *Anthropogeographie*. Erster Teil, Stuttgart 1899, Stuttgart 1909, Stuttgart 1921, pp. V—VII.

you offered me. There is scarcely any combination of facts or ideas in this book which has not been the subject of our discussions."

These quotations, I suppose, suffice to prove my contention that Moritz Wagner had a great influence on Ratzel from whom there is a direct connection not only to Graebner⁹ but also to Frobenius, Ankermann, Schurtz, Weule, Lehmann and many others who, for some time at least, worked on problems of historical ethnology. Graebner was very much aware of Ratzel's importance for having introduced historical research into ethnology and acknowledged repeatedly and with great emphasis the indebtedness of the discipline of ethnology¹⁰ and of his own work¹¹ to the great man. Whether Graebner may have been acquainted with the work of Moritz Wagner (and if so, how well) I do not know.

2. For the second connection leading from Darwin to Graebner I shall refer to the criteria of form and quantity, and in this instance I am rather certain that Graebner was not aware of a link (otherwise, I assume, he would have referred explicitly to Darwin's explanation of the criteria). However, Graebner was very conscious of the fact that these criteria had not been introduced by him but had been applied long before. He stated categorically that „they have been quite generally applied every day with universal consensus,"¹² and found it unnecessary to document that statement. He referred, of course, to the fact that these criteria had been applied in linguistic research and in critique of sources for over a hundred years, and finally also in biology¹³. It was Charles Darwin who formulated the two criteria in sentences which deserve to be quoted verbatim:

In *The Descent of Man*, arguing against the polygenists, Darwin wrote: „Although the existing races of man differ in many respects as in color, hair, shape of skull, proportions of the body, etc., yet, if their whole structure be taken into consideration, they are found to resemble each other in a *multitude* of points. *Many* of these [May I emphasize: multitude and many. Here we are faced with the criterion of quantity] are [and now we are coming to the criterion of form] of so *unimportant* or of so *singular* a nature that it is extremely improbable that they should have been independently acquired by aboriginally distinct species or races"¹⁴.

Earlier, in his *Origin of Species*, Darwin had written, stressing the importance of what we would call the criterion of form:

„Characters of paramount importance to the beings, are of *hardly any importance* in classification; characters . . . of *no service* to the beings, are often

9. Graebner, *Methode*, p. 92, 98, 99, 104, 109, 140/41, 161; Graebner, *Ethnologie*, in: *Die Kultur der Gegenwart*, Dritter Teil, Fünfte Abteilung, Anthropologie, edited by G. Schwalbe and E. Fischer. Leipzig 1923, pp. 441—446, 471, 573.

10. e.g. *Methode*, pp. 92 f., 98, 140 f., 161.

11. *Methode*, p. 104.

12. *Methode*, p. 109.

13. Perhaps it should be pointed out that the two criteria had been used particularly in the reconstruction of sources which had become lost and that one of Graebner's teachers, Scheffer-Boichorst, had been especially successful in such reconstruction research.

14. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871). New edition, revised and augmented, New York 1878, p. 178. (Part I, chapter VII. in the paragraph preceding n. 24).

of *high classificatory value*. . . . The real affinities . . . are due to . . . community of descent; . . . and we have to discover the lines of descent by the most permanent characters, whatever they may be, and of *however slight vital importance*"¹⁵.

GRAEBNER FREQUENTLY HAS BEEN CALLED a representative of the Kulturkreis-theorie, or even its originator. Here we have a tangle of misunderstandings which has endured for over 65 years. Graebner himself has tried to set the record straight, but to no avail. Yet, we must try to disentangle some of the confused mess.

Over and over again Graebner stated that he did not believe in and was not responsible for a „Kulturkreistheorie“¹⁶. In his terminology and in his method „Kulturkreis“ was a concept of only minor importance, a mere „auxiliary concept“, at most an „heuristic principle“¹⁷. The word „Kulturkreis“ had been used in German since at least 1857 in a variety of meanings, none of which had any similarity to the sense in which the word is used in anthropology today¹⁸. It was as late as 1897 that Leo Frobenius picked the word „Kulturkreis“ which until then had lacked any clear meaning, and, introducing it into ethnology, gave it a new meaning. At that time Frobenius used the word for a concept which Ratzel had defined several years earlier and for which Ratzel had used the term „*ethnographisches Land*.“ I am a bit uncertain whether I should translate these words into „ethnographic country“ or „ethnographic land.“ Anyhow, here are Ratzel's words in my rather clumsy translation (but in this instance Ratzel's German is no too smooth either):

„If we draw boundary lines on a map around those regions in which certain ethnographic traits occur, we obtain areas of distribution which differ utterly in site and shape. In the great variation of their outlines these areas may be compared to countries shown on political maps. Therefore these areas may be called *ethnographic lands*. Furthermore, comparable to the way in which countries are subdivided into smaller areas, namely provinces, which are characterized by certain differences, the ethnographic lands also can be subdivided into *ethnographic provinces*“¹⁹.

It is exactly this concept for which Frobenius introduced the word Kulturkreis in 1897. Yet, still four years later, Ankermann, for the same concept, did not use the term Kulturkreis nor Ratzel's term Ethnographic Land, but „culture-geographic province“. This may have been a mixture of Bastian's „geographic

15. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859). New edition, from the sixth English edition. New York 1878, p. 419. (Chapter XV. „Recapitulation and Conclusion,“ in the 23rd paragraph from the end.)

16. Graebner, *Ethnologie*, p. 447; Graebner in: *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen*, 1911, I, No. 5, pp. 228—230; Ankermann in: *Korrespondenz-Blatt der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, vol. 42, Numbers 8—12, August—December 1911, p. 172—173; see also *Anthropos*, vol. 58 (1963) p. 1.

17. Graebner, *Methode*, p. 132; Ankermann in: *Korrespondenzblatt* . . . , 1911, p. 173.

18. Leser, *Zur Geschichte des Wortes Kulturkreis*. In: *Anthropos*, vol. 58 (1963) pp. 1—36.

19. Ratzel, *Anthropogeographie*, Zweiter Teil, Stuttgart 1891, p. 651; editions of 1912 and 1922, p. 423.

provinces" and Ratzel's "ethnographic provinces"²⁰. However, in 1904 Ankermann was converted to the Frobenius terminology and thus induced Graebner to use the word *Kulturkreis* also when the two men, colleagues at the Berlin Museum, read two papers simultaneously at a meeting of the Berlin Anthropological Society²¹. But while Graebner from then on adhered to that concept, both Ankermann and Frobenius, and later on Schmidt and his followers, used the word *Kulturkreis* in all kinds of different meanings, thus creating no end of confusion and misunderstandings²².

Graebner's own definition ran something such as: „*Kulturkreis*, to begin with, is the term used for any area in which we find a homogeneous culture. In addition, it also is the term for those areas which have been swamped by an outside culture, as for example the Near East has been by the Hellenistic-Byzantine culture . . . Such an area does not have to show complete homogeneity since the outside culture which swamped the area may have superimposed itself on sub-areas which originally may have been heterogeneous. . . . Yet, a certain complex of cultural traits would be characteristic for a certain area and in the main limited to it"²³. „It is necessary to ascertain accurately the distribution of all cultural phenomena; such research will be facilitated and substantiated by cartographic presentation"²⁴.

In 1904 and in subsequent studies Graebner examined the distribution of culture traits in Australia, Melanesia and Polynesia. He took into account as many culture traits as possible, actually all cultural phenomena on which information was available. He did what Ratzel had suggested, namely compiled maps on which he entered the existence of the individual traits. If the distribution of a great number of traits coincided with one another Graebner then, still following Ratzel's suggestion, drew a boundary line around that area, thus creating on his map an „ethnographic land" in Ratzel's language, or a „*Kulturkreis*" in Graebner's own terminology. These maps then demonstrated that this or that „*Kulturkreis*" appeared only in—and now I will introduce some more of Ratzel's terms—*Randländern* and *Randgebieten*, in „marginal zones" and „refuge areas", while some other *Kulturkreis* on the map resembled a „wedge" driven into what formerly seemed to have been a contiguous area of a different *Kulturkreis* but now appeared on the map in two or more separated areas which apparently had become separated by the „wedge"²⁵.

From such differences in distribution Graebner, following not only Ratzel but just as well the methods used by plant- and zoogeographers, drew conclusions

20. *Current Anthropology*, vol. 5, p. 417.

21. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. 37 (1905) pp. 28—90, 759—767.

22. Leser in: *Anthropos*, vol. 58 (1963) p. 35 f.; and in *Folk-Liv*, vol. 2 (1938) pp. 121—124.

23. Graebner, *Methode*, pp. 132—133.

24. Graebner, *Methode*, p. 133, n. 1.

25. Ratzel, *Anthropogeographie*. Zweiter Teil, editions of 1912 and 1922, pp. 38—39, 48, 423 ff., 440; Edition of 1891: pp. 649 ff. (I have used Lowie, *History of Ethnological Theory*, 1937, pp. 126—127 for the English wording.) Graebner, *Methode*, p. 140, pp. 142—143, generally pp. 140—143.

as to the relative age of the cultures in question, translating culture areas or „Kulturkreise“ into culture strata. That procedure not only has been used but even hailed by American anthropologists provided they did not realize that it was Graebner and Ratzel whom they—indirectly, it must be said—praised. Howells uses distribution in „refuge areas“ to infer chronological sequence²⁶; Hooton called the „position . . . in marginal zones and refuge areas a geographical circumstance that all [!] careful students . . . consider irrefutable [!] evidence of early distribution“²⁷.

I HAVE TALKED AT GREAT LENGTH about Graebner's predecessors whose ideas he applied and whose work he continued. Graebner's importance for the history of ethnology, in my opinion, is composed of his having introduced these methods into ethnology, and of the following:

Although some of Ratzel's students engaged in distribution studies, most of them restricted their research to the distribution of individual culture traits only²⁸, thus ignoring the criterion of quantity. Frobenius, the first to try to establish a real Kulturkreis, did not succeed in exciting the discipline even though his early work was translated immediately into English and published in the prestigious publication of the Smithsonian Institution²⁹. It was Graebner's papers of 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911 and 1913³⁰ which caused a furor so intense that German anthropological discussions for several years consisted mainly of the quarrel between the opposition to Graebner and his defenders. In 1909 Father Schmidt publicly endorsed Graebner's methods and printed in his (by then influential) journal *Anthropos* a long study by Graebner which to this day

26. William Howells, *Mankind So Far*. Garden City 1947, pp. 298—300.

27. Earnest A. Hooton, *Up From the Ape*. 2nd ed., New York 1946, pp. 626 f.

28. e.g. Heinrich Schurtz, *Das Wurfmesser der Neger*. Leipzig 1889. — Karl Weule, *Der Afrikanische Pfeil*. Leipzig 1899. — Bruno Adler, *Der nordasiatische Pfeil*. Leiden 1901; id., *Die Bogen Nordasiens*. In: *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, vol. 15 (1902) pp. 1—27. — Bernhard Ankermann, *Die afrikanischen Musikinstrumente*, in: *Ethnologisches Notizblatt*, vol. 3 (1901) pp. 1—134. — Johannes Lehmann, *Die Pfahlbauten der Gegenwart, ihre Verbreitung und genetische Entwicklung*. In: *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, vol. 34 (1904) pp. 19—51. — Wilhelm Pessler, *Das altsächsische Bauernhaus in seiner geographischen Verbreitung*. Braunschweig 1906.

29. Leo Frobenius, *The Origins of African Civilizations*. In: *Smithsonian Report for 1898*, Washington 1900, pp. 637—650.

30. Kulturkreise und Kulturschichten in Ozeanien. In: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. 37 (1905); — Wanderung und Entwicklung sozialer Systeme in Australien. In: *Globus*, vol. 90 (1906); — Emil Stephan und Fritz Graebner, *Neu-Mecklenburg*. Berlin 1907; — Die sozialen Systeme in der Südsee. In: *Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*, vol. 11 (1908); — Handel bei den Naturvölkern. In: *Andrees Geographie des Welthandels*, 2nd ed. vol. I (1909); — Völkerkunde der Santa-Cruz-Inseln. In: *Ethnologica*, vol. 1 (1909); — Zur australischen Religionsgeschichte. In: *Globus*, vol. 96 (1909); — Die melanesische Bogenkultur und ihre Verwandten. In: *Anthropos*, vol. 4 (1909); — Noch einmal P. W. Schmidt und die australische Religionsgeschichte. In: *Globus*, vol. 97 (1910); — Das Problem des Totemismus. In: *Korrespondenzblatt der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, vol. 41, No. 8, August 1910; — Methode der Ethnologie, Erdofen in der Südsee. In: *Anthropos*, vol. 8 (1913); — Krückenruder. In: *Baessler-Archiv*, vol. 3 (1913).

has remained particularly controversial³¹. In 1911 the German Anthropological Association devoted an entire session to a discussion of Graebner³². From then on German, Austrian, Swiss, French, Scandinavian ethnologists, in steadily increasing numbers, took up Graebner's suggestions and engaged in similar research, and historical ethnology spread all over the world.

Decades ago, in the heyday of historical ethnology, both Kroeber and Lowie stressed the importance of distribution studies and did so in „strong words, fighting words“, as Lowie called them. Kroeber said: „To an anthropologist a cultural phenomenon unaccompanied by its ‚distribution‘ . . . is as nonsignificant a fact as an unplaced and undated event would be to a historian“³³. Lowie said: „Geographical distribution lies at the basis of our efforts at understanding culture“ and quoted a statement which he had written „many years“ earlier: „When we do not know the distribution of a phenomenon we know nothing that is theoretically significant“³⁴. Lowie added that that sentence had infuriated Malinowski.

It had been Graebner's role in the development of historical ethnology to make the discipline aware of the importance of geographical distribution. His influence waned when Malinowski and his followers became victorious.

The present-day criticism of Graebner, however, rests, I am embarrassed to state, to a large extent simply on a lack of acquaintance with the work of the man. It is easy to brush aside, as being dated, the results which a scholar presented three quarters of a century ago if one never studied his material and his presentation in detail. But as long as no one offers a better and more convincing explanation for the problems which Graebner tried to solve such simple negation is not exactly befitting a scholar although of course most convenient.

Today those who brush aside historical ethnology as having been discredited long ago claim not only that Graebner's results were wrong but also that the criteria which he applied and the method which he used must be discarded. Graebner's method led of necessity to a reconstruction of lost ancestral cultures and to an explanation of otherwise inexplicable riddles in geographical distribution. It was exactly the same method which had led Darwin to his results and which had led linguists to the reconstruction of Indoeuropean. Therefore I must state in all humility, or rather in brazen impudence, that he who denies the validity of Graebner's method also must deny that there is anything to such concepts as „Indoeuropean“ and „primates“ and may not even believe that the English, German and Swedish languages are related.

31. Die melanesische Bogenkultur, see above, note 30. It must be mentioned that in his introductory remarks Schmidt, in contradistinction to Graebner, talks about the „Kulturkreistheorie“ and the „new theory of the Kulturkreis“.

32. Fifth joint meeting of the German and the Viennese Anthropological Societies, Fifth session, August 9, 1911, see *Korrespondenzblatt der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, vol. 42, Nrs. 8—12 (1911) pp. 156—179.

33. A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology*. New edition, revised. New York 1948, p. 542.

34. Cora Du Bois (ed.), *Lowie's Selected Papers in Anthropology*. University of California Press, p. 460.