



PROJECT MUSE®

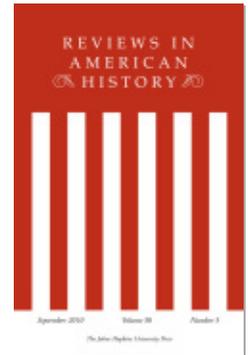
Anthropology in History: Lewis Henry Morgan and Margaret
Mead

Dennis Bryson

Reviews in American History, Volume 38, Number 3, September 2010, pp.
480-486 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2010.0025>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/395631>

ANTHROPOLOGY IN HISTORY: LEWIS HENRY MORGAN AND MARGARET MEAD

Dennis Bryson

Daniel Noah Moses. *The Promise of Progress: The Life and Work of Lewis Henry Morgan.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009. xii + 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$47.50.

Maureen A. Molloy. *On Creating a Usable Culture: Margaret Mead and the Emergence of American Cosmopolitanism.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. x + 201 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.00.

Since the 1960s, American historians have extensively borrowed from the social sciences. Thus, cultural anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, and the other social sciences have provided historians with an array of methods, concepts, and theories. Significantly, historians have also come to address another project: taking social science itself as the object of historical inquiry. Dorothy Ross's *The Origins of American Social Science* (1991) stands out as an especially notable achievement, but there have been numerous contributions to this project in recent decades. More particularly, scholars have come to examine the history of specific disciplines within the social sciences. Thus, George W. Stocking's *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (1968) gave major impetus to exploring the history of anthropology. It was followed by work in this field by Richard Handler, Regna Darnell, and others. Two recent intellectual biographies—Daniel Noah Moses' *The Promise of Progress: The Life and Work of Lewis Henry Morgan* and Maureen Molloy's *On Creating a Usable Culture: Margaret Mead and the Emergence of American Cosmopolitanism*—represent important contributions, not only to the history of anthropology, but to the history of the American social sciences more generally.

Both Moses and Molloy attempt to situate the anthropologists that they examine—Lewis Henry Morgan and Margaret Mead, two of the most prominent anthropologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively—within the intellectual and cultural worlds that they inhabited and in which they worked. Moses and Molloy also examine the influence of salient historical events and trends on the two figures. Most importantly, Moses and Molloy indicate the major civilizational and cultural problems addressed by the two

anthropologists. For Morgan the tension between nineteenth-century American commercial civilization—with its stress on acquisitive individualism—and the classical and republican values that he acquired during his education constituted a fundamental civilizational dilemma. Mead, on the other hand, focused on the problem of creating a modern, “cosmopolitan” American culture, oriented toward fostering the needs and aspirations of the individual, in the context of the emergence of consumer culture, the proliferation of new ideas regarding sex and freedom, the destabilization of gender roles, and the discrediting of the “Puritanism” and parochialism of American culture. Instructively, both Morgan and Mead elaborated their notions of ethnographic “others” within the framework of the problems and dilemmas that preoccupied them.

A successful lawyer and capitalist entrepreneur who lived most of his life in Rochester, New York, Morgan never held an academic position. Nevertheless, he became one of the major American anthropologists of the nineteenth century. Thus, Morgan was the author of *League of the Ho-De'-No-Sau-Neé or Iroquois* (1851), a pioneering ethnography of the Iroquois people; and his *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871) did much to launch the study of kinship systems. Moreover, Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877) represented an important and influential contribution to the theory of social evolution. Notwithstanding these achievements, Morgan has received little attention in recent decades; the last major biography to be published before the book by Moses is one that appeared in 1960.¹ The attack on Morgan's evolutionary schema—with its unilinear sequence from savagery to barbarism to civilization—by Franz Boas and his students did much to discredit Morgan. Indeed, in spite of the recognition of Morgan's contribution to kinship studies by such anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss, as well as a resurgence of evolutionary theory championed by Leslie White and others during the twentieth century, Morgan's reputation never recovered from the Boasian critical assault. To be sure, there was much validity to the criticisms leveled against Morgan by Boas and his disciples. Morgan *did* take for granted the superiority of civilized societies over “savage” and “barbarian” ones, and he did see the Indo-European and Semitic races as the advanced guard of civilization and progress. His rigid sequence of evolutionary stages—which came to provide the organizational schema for museum exhibits in the United States during the late nineteenth century—did not take into account the particularities of the processes of historical change undergone by diverse human societies. Finally, although sympathetic to the Indians, Morgan advocated that they be “civilized”—a program that included the partition of tribal lands into parcels of private property to be owned by individuals and their families.

Still, as Moses aptly demonstrates, there are nuances to Morgan's positions and theories that need to be taken into account. For one thing, he opposed the polygenetic theories of the origins of humankind then being advocated by

Philadelphia physician Samuel Morton and others. Morgan insisted that the human race had a single source and that the human family was one. Moreover, he was ambivalent toward civilization, seeing it as the culmination of progress—but also seeing it, in its modern commercial form, as being based on individual self-gain and the concentration of property in the hands of a few, and therefore as possessing negative as well as positive aspects. Along such lines, Morgan admired features of “barbarian” societies such as the Iroquois because they respected the “liberty, equality, and fraternity” of their members; they were also characterized by the practices of mutual assistance and hospitality. Indeed, Morgan hoped that as civilization evolved in the future, it would return to some of the features of pre-civilized societies. As he put it in a famous passage in *Ancient Society*: “A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. . . . Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society. . . . It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes [clans].”²

Moses deals in some detail with Morgan’s education. The son of Jedidiah Morgan, a prosperous upstate New York farmer, Lewis Henry Morgan received an excellent education at Union College in Schenectady. There Morgan studied the Greek and Roman classics, Scottish “Common Sense” philosophy (especially the work of Lord Kames), political economy, mathematics, the sciences, and law. From the Greeks and Romans, Morgan picked up a sense of the importance of self-command, tranquility, and the courage to pursue truth, as well as an increased dedication to the republican tradition. Morgan was especially influenced by the Roman writers Horace, Lucretius, Seneca, and Cicero. From Seneca, he gained an appreciation of “classical primitivism”—of how the first human beings followed the ways of nature, living the good life by limiting their wants—while from Cicero, he gained a sense of the value of civilization and progress. Horace and Lucretius provided Morgan with rudimentary notions of the evolution of human society. Morgan also seems to have been influenced by John Locke’s theories on the early condition of humankind in the “state of nature” and the subsequent entry of human beings into the “social contract” by means of which government was established. Morgan also read Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*.

Ancient Society, published in 1877, was perhaps Morgan’s most important and influential book. Morgan formulated in this book a theory of social evolution in which human societies progressed from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Social evolution was, according to Morgan, propelled by both mental and material factors—but Morgan emphasized changes in the mode of subsistence in explaining social evolution. For Morgan, the shift from what anthropologists have dubbed “primitive” societies, based on the kinship orga-

nization of society, to civilization, characterized by the emergence of the state and political organization, constituted a fundamental evolutionary step for humankind. Morgan admired features of primitive societies, but ultimately he placed greater value on civilization. In civilized societies, property came to be protected by government, the monogamous family and romantic love flourished, the arts of subsistence and the level of wealth reached higher planes, and urban life and writing appeared. Nonetheless, as we have seen, Morgan hoped that somehow the “mere property career of mankind” would come to an end and a higher synthesis would emerge combining civilization with the liberty, equality, and fraternity of primitive society. Morgan did not spell out how such a synthesis might come about.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of works on Margaret Mead, some focusing on her relationship with her close friend and sometime lover, Ruth Benedict, others focusing on various aspects of her life and work. However, Maureen Molloy's *On Creating a Usable Culture: Margaret Mead and the Emergence of American Cosmopolitanism* stands out, in the opinion of this reviewer, as the best critical assessment of Mead's work and treatment of the intellectual and cultural milieu in which she produced this work. Focusing on the years 1925 to 1935—the period in which Mead produced several of her best-known works, including *Coming of Age in Samoa* and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*—Molloy examines Mead's intellectual development and aspects of her life and career pertinent to that development. While sympathetic to Mead, Molloy also recognizes Mead's weaknesses, such as her tendency to neglect the colonial contexts of the peoples she studied and her turn to biology in the 1930s.

Molloy emphasizes that Mead wrote much of her work for a “middle-brow” audience consisting of educated middle-class Americans, rather than primarily for her fellow anthropologists. In doing this, Mead had an educational goal in mind, namely, to offer her readers ethnographic materials from “primitive” societies so that the readers could gain perspective on their own culture and its problems. As Mead put it, “By the study and analysis of the diverse solutions which other members of the human race have applied to the problems which confront us today, it is possible to make a more reasoned judgment of the needs of our own society” (p. 4). Mead was especially concerned with the problems of sexuality and selfhood, the destabilization of gender roles, and deviancy in her writings; and her representations of ethnographic “others” were elaborated within the framework of her concern for such problems. As Molloy suggests, Mead's penchant for focusing on the cultural problems of her era and for proffering advice on these problems, as well as the literary and journalistic character of much of her writing, did not endear her to fellow anthropologists.

Molloy deals in some detail with the intellectual influences on Mead. As is well known, Mead was one of Franz Boas' students; she was also much influenced by Ruth Benedict, another Boas student, while studying at Barnard College and then at Columbia. However, Molloy is not primarily concerned with the impact of Boas and Benedict on Mead; rather, Molloy examines in detail the influence on Mead of the "cultural nationalist movement"—which included Herbert Croly, Van Wyck Brooks, and Randolph Bourne. Living and working in New York City in the years before World War I, the intellectuals of the cultural nationalist movement were concerned with the creation of a modern, distinctively American national culture, one that would integrate the individual into the community, enhance individual creativity and fulfillment, and diminish the crassly materialistic, parochial, "Puritanical," chaotic, and alienated aspects of American culture. For Bourne, the new culture would also involve tolerance and sensitivity with respect to the multi-ethnic character of American society, as America came to affirm its "transnational," cosmopolitan character. According to Molloy, Mead was exposed to the writings of the cultural nationalist critics at home (her father subscribed to many of the "little magazines" in which they wrote) and later as a student at Barnard and Columbia. Molloy suggests that Mead's future concern with the relation of the individual to culture (especially her interest in the study of personality and culture) stemmed from the influence of the writers of the cultural nationalist movement.

Mead's first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), was a best-seller and propelled her to national and even international celebrity. Based on fieldwork conducted among the Samoans by Mead in the mid-1920s, the book focused on the experience of adolescence among Samoan girls. Mead depicted Samoa as a sexual paradise in which Samoan adolescents were given freedom to experiment with sexual relations as they came of age in a "homogeneous," relatively conflict-free culture. In the background, Molloy suggests, lurked the figure of the "flapper," the young American female who defied conventional sexual and gender codes and thus seemed to threaten traditional values. Notwithstanding the resemblance of the Samoan girl to the flapper, however, the former, in seeming contrast to the flapper, was fully integrated into her culture. Indeed, Molloy sees *Coming of Age in Samoa* as epitomizing the cultural determinist perspective that Mead embraced in the 1920s. The book also demonstrates the manner in which Mead elaborated images of ethnographic "others" within the context of her perception of the era's social and cultural problems—in this case the problem of rebellious youth, especially female youth, during the 1920s. Significantly, *Coming of Age in Samoa* concludes with Mead's plea that American youth be provided with an "education for choice" that would allow them to choose values, personal beliefs, and ways of living in a rational manner.

Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) represents, according to Molloy, the culmination of what Molloy sees as a problematic turn in Mead's work—her increasing emphasis on biology in her treatment of the relationship between the individual and culture. While continuing to claim that culture played a major role in shaping personality, Mead came to stress the importance of innate temperament in this book. To be sure, Mead demonstrated that the traits that were stereotyped as masculine or feminine in American culture could take on very different meanings in the New Guinea societies that she studied. Thus, among the Arapesh, both men and women were gentle and nurturing, while among the Mundugumor, both sexes were aggressive and harsh. Finally, among the Tchambuli, women were dominant and impersonal, while men were dependent and emotional. Although such ethnographic findings might seem to be evidence for the cultural construction of gender (as we would now put it), for Mead they seemed to demonstrate the uneven distribution of the inherent temperamental traits of maleness and femaleness in various human societies. Indeed, as Mead conducted her fieldwork in New Guinea, she developed her "squares" hypothesis—which posited four fundamental temperamental types rooted in biological factors and distributed in different proportions among various human groups. Thus, the individual's temperament was not, for the most part, culturally determined, but was innate. Accordingly, Mead speculated that cultural traits might be derived from the prevailing temperament of a group's members. In any case, deviancy posed a special problem: those possessing temperaments at odds with the prevailing culture—an aggressive Arapesh, a gentle Mundugumor, a dominant Tchambuli male, or a dependent Tchambuli female—might face major problems of adjustment in that culture. Mead was especially concerned with the problem of homosexuality. She believed that the members of cultures that rigidly dichotomized male and female roles were especially prone to homosexuality. Mead advised that such cultures—which of course included modern American culture—become more tolerant and flexible, allowing women and men more freedom in the activities and roles that they pursued. Ironically, given Mead's own sexual inclinations toward women, she suggested that such flexibility and tolerance would lead to the disappearance of homosexuality.

Molloy observes that Mead participated in the "turn to culture" evident in the United States during the 1930s (as noted by historian Warren Susman in his *History as Culture* [1984]). Given the biological basis of the temperament of the individual, it would seem that the individual was not, in his or her temperamental core, subject to cultural determinism. Nevertheless, culture could shape and obstruct the expression of the individual's temperament. Hence efforts should be made at reforming culture, rather than the temperament of the individual; culture should be altered so that it fosters, rather than constrains, individual growth and development. Of the culture concept elabo-

rated by Mead and others during the 1930s, Molloy perceptively observes: "This 'culture' is sufficiently vague and non-located that it can be seen as the source of our difficulties. . . . It can be seen as 'the system,' an impersonal force that, because we can break it down into its components, may be amenable to change. Because it is made up of values, attitudes, behaviors, and rituals, we can frame change without hurting anyone or challenging fundamental property relations" (pp. 132–33).

Molloy is critical of Mead's increasing emphasis on biology. As Molloy puts it: "Mead lacked, at the level of both the individual and the socio-cultural, any theory of endogenous change. Therefore, variation in human 'personality' or responses to life could generally be found only in that realm she understood to be outside history and outside culture—that is, biology" (p. 18). Nevertheless, overall, Molloy remains positive toward Mead and her achievement. Molloy credits Mead with the formulation of a cosmopolitan ethos—one that encouraged Americans, especially those involved in raising and educating the young—to utilize ethnographic knowledge in order to fashion their own culture and lives in an enlightened manner. As Molloy puts it, Mead saw her mission "as the creation of usable Others for American parents and educators" (p. 139). In a sense, as Molloy suggests, this mission recalls that of Randolph Bourne, one of Mead's early mentors.

Dennis Bryson, Department of American Culture and Literature, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey, is the author of *Socializing the Young: The Role of Foundations, 1923–1941* (2002).

1. Carl Resek, *Lewis Henry Morgan: American Scholar* (1960).
2. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (1998, orig. publ. 1877), 552.