

Wilhelm Schmidt: A Closer Look

Abstract. — *It is sometimes said that Wilhelm Schmidt had no real theory of history, that he was opposed to certain schools of thought primarily because of his clerical background, and that, owing to his "Austrian mind," he failed to take certain elementary precautions in his attempt to define culture. The present article seeks to show that such interpretation of Schmidt and his work is historically untenable. This the author does (1) by distinguishing between theory and philosophy, (2) by pointing out the sources of Schmidt's theory, his various assumptions, and his reasons for his opposition to other schools of thought, and, finally, (3) by reminding the reader of the meaning of "culture circle" as understood by Schmidt. [History of Ethnology, Kulturkreislehre, W. Schmidt]*

It is sometimes said that Wilhelm Schmidt had no theory and that he was not doing history at all. Many of his premises, it is sometimes supposed, simply came from his having "an Austrian mind" and from the fact that he was a Catholic priest¹. Such an interpretation of Schmidt and his work is historically untenable, as the following closer look at Schmidt, we hope, will show.

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¹ In an article published in *Man* (14.1979:133-144), Karin R. Andriolo stated that W. Schmidt did not have a theory of history with which he worked, that, indeed, he did not do history in his ethnological work at all. Why he did what he did in the way he did it came from the fact that he worked in the Austrian milieu. In addition she formulates some conclusions regarding Schmidt's concept, or lack thereof, of culture. In the process she draws some conclusions regarding Schmidt's mode of criticising others, especially monotheism and psychoanalysis.

In this article I would like to respond to these allegations, for the time being in a programmatic way. Obviously I think many of her strictures are wrong. Schmidt deserves critique, but not for the reasons Andriolo offers, as I hope to show here. In a later study these points will be addressed in greater detail.

1. Theory versus Philosophy

What is meant by a “theory of history”? And, by contrast, by a “method of (doing) history”? Toynbee’s approach to history, especially to historical development, by investigating challenge and response, would probably be a theory of history since it puts certain propositions together to explain historical development. The same would probably be true of the frontier thesis which was meant to explain America’s history and values. Others who analyse history according to a “great man” theory, or, obversely, as a consequence of impersonal social and cultural movements, also present these frameworks as a theory of history. Then they read through the available sources, either to confirm or reject the theories, totally or partially.

More probably a historian begins not with a particular theory at all, but with some concrete data or information. Then he develops some hypotheses to explain these discrete data, and finally fits all of these hypotheses into some general framework which becomes his theory, which then directs further reading into other sources. Note the term “directs”: a theory can easily lead to a biased further reading. All of this, of course, will be affected by one’s philosophy, i.e., by one’s understanding of how the world is to be ultimately explained, what the final or ultimate principles regulating or logically explaining ultimate reality, or the lack thereof, actually are. So Hegel would clearly be writing about a philosophy of history when he writes about the unfolding Spirit. What Marx offers, on the other hand, from one perspective would be a philosophy of history, from another a theory of history, one which he and many others would say offers the only true explanation of history. And so we come to and can talk about the even trickier question of the *truth* of history, or the truth of anything for that matter.²

Applying this to W. Schmidt, we can say that his metaphysics was one of essences which can be known, not in themselves but as they are worked over and on by the mind. His epistemology, therefore, was one of moderate realism. Both his metaphysics and his epistemology have a substantial history reaching all the way back to Aristotle. He would also, as a result, have held a philosophy of history such that history was knowable, and therefore, within broad limits, capable of being reconstructed. In fact, if anybody were working with culture and were not doing history, that person, as far as Schmidt was concerned, was not really doing anything worthwhile. He either ignored the whole movement or school (Schmidt, like others of his time, tended to put people into schools), e.g., sociology as a

² Few distinctions were made by Andriolo in her critique of Schmidt. The statement is merely made, and affirmed by Ulrich Braukämper in his comments on her article (*Man* 14.1979:560f.), that Schmidt had no theory of history, nor did he do history. We can conclude, it seems, that he must have done nothing, and all this, as far as his *Ursprung der Gottesidee* is concerned, in twelve huge volumes. This is debatable.

study of contemporary society, or he viewed the movement as simply wrong, as when functionalism tried to understand a society while deliberately excluding the historical dimension. And when somebody tried to explain one (history) by virtue of the other (function), Schmidt became especially critical. When this, in addition, impinged on the history of religion, his own chosen field, he became even more incensed. On all these grounds, for example, he found Durkheim's work on Australian religion wanting. So he dismissed him in one and one half pages of his *Ursprung der Gottesidee* (1929:579). Schmidt says nothing, quite obviously from his own perspective, of Durkheim's work on suicide or even the division of labor. Nor does Schmidt object when someone does social/cultural history from written sources, as M. Weber did so well, whom he does not quote at all. Schmidt was doing something else, namely culture history, and primarily, though not exclusively, in the cultural domain of religion, using culture itself as his source of data. This is what he critiqued when the occasion called for it.

Schmidt's theory of history is somewhat more difficult to identify. But he did have one; of that there is no doubt. And the culture circle theory certainly does *not* qualify as *the* theory of history for Schmidt. The German expression for "culture circle theory" is *Kulturkreislehre*, which can also mean simply "culture circle teaching"³. *Kulturkreislehre* does not constitute a body of theories, simply because it was never intended to. Culture circles turn out rather to be part of the method, and a minimal part at that according to Graebner, or, as Schmidt would have preferred to understand them, as the end result of a culture-historical investigation. Having, with the help of the method, established the culture circles as one-time independently created adaptive entities, one can then do certain things with them, e.g., leave them stand as they are for purely descriptive purposes, or see how different culture circles have intermingled to form other more complex circles. Schmidt did both of these, of course, but intended much more: he intended, again using his method, to inject time into the results of his development of culture circles. One can criticise Schmidt's culture circle creations; one may not agree with the time frame he claims to uncover in his comparison. Certainly one can criticise and disagree with the assumptions with which he starts his entire enterprise in the first place. But one is critiquing results and applications and assumptions, not theories or methodology (Henninger 1979b: 27f.).

So we are still faced with the problem of Schmidt's theory of history, i.e., with the set of interrelated propositions which he used to explain the past, which he, too, modified and changed as he did his culture-historical investigations.

³ For information regarding the history of the term *Kulturkreis* and its introduction into ethnology as a technical term, see Leser 1963.

2. Schmidt's Sources, Assumptions, and Reasons for Opposition

a. Sources

To get an idea of how Schmidt proposed to understand and interpret history, we must examine the influences that affected Schmidt. In this context it is important to note that Schmidt, as an ethnologist, was a totally self-educated person. His theory was a critical amalgam of the three earliest influences on his life as an ethnologist, namely of evolution, of a modified version of Bastian's theory of *Elementargedanken*, with a large dose of geographic and ecological determinism thrown in. And this last is not so far removed from the economic determinism of Marx.

1) *Evolution* was part of the climate of the times when Schmidt began his self-education in ethnology, part of the air people breathed. He, too, believed in evolution and maintained that cultures and peoples developed in stages. He stated clearly that he accepted the basic fact, if not all the tenets, of evolution (1937b: VII f.). Schmidt discusses at length the factors which he identified as important for evolution in his *Völker und Kulturen*, a book which he had already finished by 1914, and which he was busy writing perhaps as early as 1912. (The book, it should be noted, was published in 1924, twelve years later.)⁴ He stated that culture growth is cyclic and proceeds in waves, a feature which shows itself most obviously in fashions, in clothes, and in styles in art (1924:45).⁵ The dynamics which Schmidt identified as underlying evolution were not to be viewed as natural or scientific laws in the sense that they always applied to cultural evolution in the same way that natural science "laws" applied. For Schmidt, the study of culture was an historical study, a *Geisteswissenschaft*, and he bridled any time someone claimed to have discovered invariant laws of development (1906)⁶. All those

⁴ There is some confusion regarding when Schmidt wrote his contribution to this book. Koppers (1959:119) said Schmidt was essentially finished with his part by 1915. J. Henninger addresses the issue in *Anthropos* (62.1967:215 notes 18-20). My point remains that Schmidt had a clear idea of what he meant by culture and evolution quite early in his professional career.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in speaking of fashions in clothes as a marker of cyclic change, Schmidt paralleled, even anticipated, A. Kroeber, who wrote his first article on women's fashions in 1919. However, in this article Kroeber said he first had the idea of working with women's fashions to show the cyclic nature of culture some 20 years earlier.

⁶ The term *Geisteswissenschaft*, which Sieber translated (Schmidt 1939:15) as "science of the mind," is difficult to translate into English with one term. "Humanities" is one attempt, but it is not totally accurate. "Social Sciences" are also largely included, as is history, whether viewed as a humanities or as a social science. In any case, the term must be understood as standing in contrast to the "natural sciences" or *Naturwissenschaften*. So while Sieber's translation as "science of the mind" (and this can be understood in several ways in English) is inadequate, it still has some merit in highlighting that ethnology, and therefore culture, has as its object only those items which are somehow symbolic, i.e., have been worked on by the human mind.

who claimed this he lumped together and criticised together. Therefore he also puts evolutionism and communism (or materialism or Bolshevism) together as equally wrong because both schools claimed to have discovered (natural) "laws" which directed human evolution. There was no "guilt by association" intended on Schmidt's part. Indeed, Schmidt was justified in putting Marx on the side of the evolutionists and of evolutionism in as much as Marx claimed there were invariant natural laws of evolution. This is precisely what Schmidt meant by "evolutionism."

Schmidt also denied the absolute necessity of evolution for every culture, or the requirement as espoused by some, that all groups must pass through every stage, all of which were usually predetermined. Development and change also proceeded historically, as a result of either direct contact between peoples or as a result of the diffusion of cultural items only (Bornemann 1938: 71f. and *passim*).

Whether change (development, evolution) had come about through inner development (evolution) or through historical contact (diffusion) was an open question for Schmidt. One had to prove either position. However, he did say that all peoples started out with one original culture in one specific place (1924:35 and 71). This was basically an assumption of Schmidt. The people in this original group then dispersed and eventually developed other unique cultures, limited in number, not necessarily having to pass through previous stages to get to the invention of their present-day culture. Then further modification and change occurred through historical contact. As a conclusion to his investigations and those of his predecessors (like Graebner), Schmidt admitted independent development at least seven times, corresponding to his seven culture circles. According to Schmidt, the first of these circles, the absolutely earliest culture circle, no longer existed as such. He postulated and derived this no-longer-existing circle by comparing the relatively earliest existing circles, or, in the case of the Tasmanians, known from documents.⁷ Evolution was one source of his theory.

2) The second source of Schmidt's theory of history was derived from the theory of *Elementargedanken*, which was worked out and utilized by A. Bastian in his ethnology (1860). These were innate ideas which expressed themselves in the same way for everybody. The human psyche was everywhere essentially the same in constitution with the same needs. These needs were satisfied in the same basic manner, by the invention of tools, of social institutions, and by developing religious world views and cult forms,—in short, by developing culture. There will be modifications in the tools, the

⁷ Schmidt changed and modified his culture circles, both as to number, but especially as to content, as his research continued. Fr. Bornemann (1955) has presented Schmidt's own reworking of the culture circles which he attempted shortly before his death from his own notes in preparation for a new edition of his *Handbook of Comparative Religion*. This issue will become clearer in a larger work in preparation.

social institutions and the religions that are developed, but these modifications will not mean that the cultures are essentially different as they are developed. The differences come about as the result of geography, climate, etc. The end result of the *Elementargedanken* developing in specific regions are what Bastian called *Völkergedanken* (1881).

Schmidt was very sympathetic to the whole thrust of *Elementargedanken* theory. As others have noted, one consequence of Bastian's basic position came back later under the title of the "psychic unity of all men." Schmidt certainly held this. Typically he phrased this historically, opting, as a result, for monogenism for the origin of man. Also Schmidt in his work concentrated on what Bastian would have called the *Völkergedanken*. Culture for Schmidt was of interest primarily in as much as it was a possession of a *Volk*, a group. His scientific concern was *Völkerkunde*, not the study of the individual. Schmidt insisted, however, that different groups did not all independently have to create the same cultures and then proceed through identical stages because they all have the same *Elementargedanken*. Nor is there total freedom to create or invent any kind of culture whatsoever or wherever. The invention has been limited and the results of his studies showed, to his satisfaction at least, how many different inventions of unique combinations and kinds of cultures there were. These again were the different culture circles, which he describes as results, and therefore confirmations and even proofs, of his theory. Schmidt also insisted that an individual, because of his psychology, i.e., his genius and creativity, or lack thereof, could influence the course of evolution. Because of his essential freedom, man could not be reduced, in himself or in his development, to natural determination, which was another reason natural law could not be applied to cultural evolution (1924:36f.). Certainly psychology was a source of Schmidt's theory of development and history, but not in the form of *Elementar-* or *Völkergedanken*.

3) The third source that must be considered is *Ratzel*. Behind the invention or creation of different cultures was the need to adapt, first and foremost, to the local environment, the fauna and flora of a geographical area. But Schmidt went beyond the material and economic to include the social, ethical and religious factors in his adaptation scheme. There were social conditions to which groups had to adapt. This also meant ethical requirements had to be considered. Religious reality also required a cultural response.

Much of this had been discussed at length by *Ratzel*, from whom Schmidt also learned and took much of his theoretical and methodological underpinning. *Ratzel*'s works were also just appearing in print as Schmidt began his reading in ethnology. *Ratzel* stressed the need, for example, to first of all establish the actual historical origin of an item and only then to inquire into the psychological origin. He maintained also that different historical origins were possible, with subsequent migration all over the world. Items found all over the world, even when they are found far apart, may be histo-

rically related, a notion which Schmidt took over as part of his own theoretical underpinning, an idea which he felt he had also confirmed in his early linguistic work. In his early work describing what he means by ethnology, a work which is really a history of anthropology to that date, Schmidt quotes Ratzel at great length and with obvious approval for his ideas (Schmidt 1906).

Using these and similar concepts, Schmidt began his investigations, testing their appropriateness, relating them to one another, modifying his concepts as required. He took from his mentors what he thought was valid and developed his own theory of history. Whether his choice of components and the way he put them together was adequate for what he attempted to do is another thing, because over and above all of this, Schmidt had further ambitions. And here, it seems to me, we begin to touch on Schmidt's philosophy of history. He wanted to get at the actual origin of culture, and especially, since this was his main interest, at the actual origin of religion. He wanted to arrive at the *really real* as regards religion. He assumed that this was possible, and that the original form of religion would be the really real. But here it seems—and this is very critical—he is mixing history and philosophy, trying to prove one by means of the other. The shoemaker should stick to his last!

b. Schmidt's Assumptions

There are many grounds for criticising Schmidt, some better than others. His theory of history leaves much scope for criticism, as does his philosophy of the same. One of the grounds for criticism which is not so good, however, is to blame everything on his "Austrian mind" (Andriolo 1979: 138). As a matter of fact, it is doubtful if Schmidt had "an Austrian mind," at least as far as his ethnology is concerned. He was a North German by birth (Westphalian), of working class origins by social upbringing. His first studies were taken in Holland (on the high school level), and he came to Austria after he had finished the equivalent of college in Holland, including philosophy and theology, and after studying at the University of Berlin for three semesters (Henninger 1956, 1979a). And the reason he came to Austria was very extrinsic: he was *sent* there by his religious superiors. He found Austria and Vienna very much to his liking, but again, at least initially, for reasons which had little or nothing to do with the Austrian mind. He began his scientific work and made his initial reputation in linguistics, and he liked Vienna because of the many fine libraries that he found and could use there. They were the best, probably, in the world for his linguistic purposes. He also liked Austria because it was basically a Catholic country, and Catholic research, i.e., research done by a Catholic, was acceptable there. Because he was a Catholic priest, his work, he himself felt, would have been rejected out-of-hand in his own Protestant-dominated Germany (Personal Recollections in an unpublished series of lectures 1940). The *Kulturkampf* going on in Germany at this time is good reason to suspect that Schmidt's feelings

in this respect were well-founded⁸. This also helps explain his great desire to make Catholic ethnological science respectable through his work, especially through his founding of the *Anthropos* journal (see Rivinius 1981:41ff.).

Very soon after he came to Vienna, Schmidt took out Austrian citizenship. As his reputation grew as a result of his publications, he began to cultivate connections of all kinds, professional, political, and personal. He felt this was very important, something he had learned very early as he tried to establish his *Anthropos* journal. Schmidt, moreover, was obviously not a wilting wallflower when it came to dealing with people, whatever their rank and position. He fell in love with Austria and spent most of his life there, leaving only when the Nazis threatened him and his work⁹. All of the above, however, made it useful for him to become an Austrian citizen.

If one looks at Schmidt's production more carefully, one is immediately impressed with the fact that his scientific orientation and stimulus came from Germany and England more than from Austria. If Schmidt did have a mind-set of any kind which came from some place other than his own background and personal philosophy, it would have been that of international Roman Catholicism, and not something developed out of his Austrian connections.¹⁰

c. Schmidt's Opposition to Other Schools of Thought

But here, too, one must be careful to make distinctions. Schmidt's criticism of other schools did not flow from his clerical antipathy to Bolshevism (Andriolo 1979:136). He critiqued others by (1) placing them against his method, or (2) comparing their results with the results he had derived from his "scientific" research. If the comparison showed deficiencies on either or both scores, then they, their work, their results, were simply wrong and even sometimes wrong-headed. Tylor was wrong, for example, because his method was wrong, and because he misconstrued or ignored the ethnographic facts. Durkheim was wrong because he claimed a very early, even original, age for the Central Australians, which Schmidt, to his own satisfaction at least, had proven were later in time (1926:559f.). Schmidt then often proceeded to throw the baby out with the bath. Nothing Durkheim did in his (historical) book was worthy of consideration. Communism's

⁸ The *Kulturkampf* officially was largely at an end already by 1890. But the effects remained (see Rivinius 1981:15ff.). In fact, some of the laws which were enacted during the *Kulturkampf* were only repealed during the First World War.

⁹ A more complete discussion of Schmidt's political contacts in Vienna as well as his "antisemitism," which Andriolo mentions, must await a more complete biography of W. Schmidt.

¹⁰ U. Braukämper also suggests this as a possibility in his response to Andriolo's article.

explanation of the origin of religion was also wrong because it also placed the origin much too late in ethnological time. Moreover, many of the (early) Communist theorists opted for some version of the theory of M. Müller and of nature mythology as the origin of religion. And this was eventually disproven by animism as well as by the culture-historical approach. For this reason also the socialist-communist theory was unacceptable. None of the socialist-communist theorists, finally, had ever presented a thoroughgoing critique of ethnological materials according to the Marxist theory or method (Schmidt himself was not sure what to call it). Until they presented a better analysis than the culture-historians had, they were not really to be taken seriously. The implication always was that they could not, given their principles. Schmidt often applied the principle: *quod gratis assertur, gratis negatur* to those whom he critiqued. He certainly applied the principle to Marx (1926:702).

3. The Meaning of “Culture Circles”: Schmidt’s Method

Finally a word about Schmidt’s method, the so-called culture-historical method, which Graebner had worked out first in the context of concrete ethnological study (1905) and then explicitly in his *Methode der Ethnologie* (1911). Schmidt claimed this as far and away the best method worked out so far, a claim which may still be true. Sometimes Schmidt seemed to say this culture-historical method of Graebner, which was the one he himself used, was the only possible method. And again, this or some modified version of this method may eventually prove to be the only way of doing culture-history. He may have been right again. Of course, if this is the only method available, and if this method proves faulty, and faulty precisely as a method and not just faulty in the way it is applied (Henninger 1979*b*), then the conclusion would have to be that culture-history itself is impossible. But we may have to be either as optimistic as Schmidt about the unique correctness of this method, nor as pessimistic as many anthropologists are about the possibility of doing culture history at all, whether with this or some other method. For Schmidt it was this method which validated his conclusions regarding the culture circles, their existence and description, their relations both in time and in space. This then gave Schmidt a handle on time and history, and also supposedly his peek at the origin of culture and especially of religion.

So far so good. There is another dimension besides history in the term *culture-history*. In this context, criticism of Schmidt is more to the point. Schmidt did not work with a clear theory of culture. His definition of culture was good—surprisingly modern as a matter of fact—but the consequences of that definition escaped Schmidt. All of the work being done today with the concept of culture, with meaning in culture, culture as symbols, epistemology and culture, knowability, relativity, truth and reality as tested culturally and cross-culturally, seems to indicate that anthropology still does

not have an adequate theory of culture, or at least not one on which everybody will agree. And this, I suggest, led Schmidt up a garden path much more than his lack of a philosophy or a theory of history, or even a methodology to test that theory. Schmidt was doing history all right, and he did have a theory. It just did not cover enough of the domain of his enterprise. Depending on how "fullfledged" a definition has to be, Schmidt already had one in 1914 (his manuscript *Völker und Kulturen*), as he himself says in his *Handbuch* (1937b:7). Schmidt gave a similar definition in his book *High Gods of North America*, which appeared in English in 1933.

The key term which Schmidt uses in his definition, namely "Geist," is not as unclear as is sometimes supposed (cf. Andriolo 1979:137). In German, "Geist" can mean many things, including Hegel's *Geist*, depending on the context. Also the adjectives derived from *Geist* can take two forms, viz. *geistig* and *geistlich*. As Schmidt used *Geist* and *geistig* with reference to culture, it meant anything in man or any activity of man which turns out to be peculiarly human, precisely in as much as this "something" or this activity is non-material. It is best understood perhaps as that mental capability which man has, which makes him unique, and which can best be defined as his capacity to symbolize, a capacity that implies or includes an ability to abstract and to make abstractions (two mutually dependent but not exactly identical activities). This capacity is often placed in the mind.¹¹ In this context I offer the definition of culture which Schmidt gives early in his *Handbuch* (1937b:7). The translation is that of S. Sieber:

"Ethnology is a science of the mind.¹² All that it deals with has proceeded from the mind, has gone through the mind and bears its impress, and it is precisely through this process that it becomes a culture object. A mere object of nature as such does not belong to the field of investigation of ethnology."

Objects, relationships, events, in so far as they have been worked on and over by the mind are culture. Put differently, culture is the set of symbols we have derived from objects, etc. around us. It is also the meanings we attach to these symbols.

This is one reading of Schmidt's definition of culture. *Geist* (translated here correctly as "mind") remains the key term in German, but it is not so vague and unclear in the context in which it is used.

Conclusion

I have not attempted to justify Schmidt in every respect in this short essay, or in any respect for that matter. His work cannot be justified in every respect. Much of it was just plain wrong. And to show what can be justified

¹¹ This is also clearly brought out by Andriolo's own paraphrase of Schmidt's definition.

¹² See note 6 above.

must wait for another time and a longer essay. He certainly tried too much too soon. Perhaps the time will never come when anyone can do what Schmidt tried. For the kind of worldwide culture-historical reconstructions that Schmidt attempted, the time may forever be too soon. Sufficient data are not, and never will be, available to do the things Schmidt claimed to be doing. Or if they ever are, they will have to come from other sources as well as from the study of culture itself, e.g., from archeology as direct evidence.¹³ In every case, such reconstructions of earlier stages and especially of origins, as Schmidt himself said, will forever be provisional. But neither can it be said he didn't try. Nor can it be said that some of his reconstructions may not some day prove "true."

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¹³ Schmidt appreciated all the help ethnology, as a science, could get from other sciences. He also saw the value of archeology. Often, however, archeology was pressed into the services of his own interests, or he would interpret archeological finds, somewhat gratuitously at times, to coincide with the conclusions he felt he had proven from ethnology, for example in Schmidt 1937b.

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