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MELVILLE JEAN HERSKOVITS

1895—1963

A Biographical Memoir by
JOSEPH C. GREENBERG

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Biographical Memoir

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W. L. H. H. H. H.

MELVILLE JEAN HERSKOVITS

September 10, 1895–February 26, 1963

BY JOSEPH H. GREENBERG

MELVILLE J. HERSKOVITS was, at the time of his death, the acknowledged dean of African studies in the United States as well as a major figure in the world of anthropology. His achievements were impressive, whether measured in terms of field work, scholarly publications, organizational activities, or the training of students. His outstanding personal characteristics were a well-nigh boundless energy and enthusiasm for every aspect of his multifarious activities and a wide range of scientific and humanistic interests. His wife, Frances, a professional anthropologist in her own right, was his lifelong collaborator and co-worker whose contributions are not to be measured solely from the list of works which she co-authored with him.

Melville Jean Herskovits was born in Bellefontaine, Ohio, on September 10, 1895; he lived there until the age of ten. He subsequently lived in El Paso, Texas, and Erie, Pennsylvania, where he graduated from Erie High School in 1912. In 1915 he entered the University of Cincinnati and the Hebrew Union College, the latter for theological studies. In World War I he served in the Medical Corps and on his return he entered and graduated from the University of Chicago as a history major. Another undergraduate subject of interest was biology, the

training in which was to stand him in good stead in his physical anthropological researches.

At the time of his university studies anthropology hardly existed as an undergraduate area of specialization. Hence, like many others who became professionals, he first became seriously interested in anthropology as a career in the course of his graduate studies. It was then that he came under the influence of Alexander A. Goldenweiser of the New School for Social Research and of Franz Boas at Columbia University in New York. In anthropology as conceived by these men Herskovits found the methodology for the study of human history and behavior and a body of theoretical knowledge which supplied what he had felt was lacking in the other disciplines in which he had worked. In particular Franz Boas, indisputably the leading figure in American anthropology during this period and long afterward, helped to shape his outlook so that he always considered himself as one who continued the Boasian tradition. He was later to write a biography of Boas and to be his staunch defender when, after Boas' death, a certain reaction set in against his theoretical approach and his personal contribution was deprecated. Another intellectual influence which did much in shaping Herskovits' views on the economics of nontechnological societies was that of Thorstein Veblen, with whom he had frequent contacts during the early and mid-1920s, both at the New School for Social Research in New York and later in Washington at the time that he was conducting physical anthropological research and teaching at Howard.

Herskovits received his Ph.D. degree at Columbia in 1923; his thesis, "The Cattle Complex in East Africa," was carried out under Boas' supervision. This study became the starting point of his fundamental work on the classification of African cultures into "culture areas," which appeared in preliminary form in 1924 and more definitively in his well-known paper "The Culture Areas of Africa" (*Africa*, 3:59-77, 1930). Al-

though culture area analysis is today by no means so prominent a theoretical issue as it was at that time, Herskovits' classification is still of value for historical and descriptive analysis, and many a course on African ethnology still employs it as a theoretical framework.

After receiving his doctorate Herskovits became one of the original fellows of the Board of the Biological Sciences of the National Research Council, under whose auspices he carried out a four-year study of variability of the American Negro under race crossing. His major conclusion was that, contrary to what might have been expected in then current genetic theory, variability had not increased and that the American Negro had evolved into a distinct racial type different from the parent stocks, a type, moreover, which was roughly as homogeneous as any other recognized racial group. Another important facet of this study was the attention paid to sociocultural factors of selection. The results are described in Herskovits' book *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing* (New York, 1928). These conclusions and the data on which they were based were likewise presented in more technical form in a monograph, *The Anthropometry of the American Negro* (New York, 1930), which appeared in the series Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology.

In 1924 he married Frances Shapiro. Their only child, a daughter, Jean, became a historian with a specialized interest in West Africa. In 1927 Herskovits joined the faculty of Northwestern University where he founded the Anthropology Department and where he continued throughout his scholarly career.

From Herskovits' study of the physical anthropology of the American Negro there emerged during this period what was to be the major research interest of his career, the systematic comparative study of New World Negro cultures in relation to their source cultures in Africa, particularly West Africa. In

Herskovits' view the variations the New World cultures exhibited in relation to the different situations into which the Negro was brought as a slave constituted a vast comparative laboratory from which might emerge results of general value to the understanding of the interrelationship between culture and physical form as well as the processes of cultural change. Moreover, such studies would shed light on the basic nature of Negro culture.

He hypothesized that the most illuminating method of studying the nature of cultures is by considering conditions in which the culture has maintained itself under stress and strain. In the case of the New World Negro, what was retained, what discarded, and what modified would point the way to a better understanding of what was found in Africa itself as well as make for a better understanding of the process of culture as a whole.

In accordance with this program, he undertook a series of field studies of broad scope. The results of these studies were largely embodied in a series of books, *Rebel Destiny* (1934, with Frances Herskovits), *Suriname Folk-lore* (1936, with Frances Herskovits), based on work in Dutch Guiana, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937), and *Trinidad Village* (1946, also with Frances Herskovits).

It was only natural that Herskovits should not be content with descriptions of African cultures in the ethnographic literature but should wish to investigate at firsthand the African background of the New World Negro. He therefore undertook during the mid-1930s a field study of the West African kingdom of Dahomey, the direct source of many African elements of New World Negro culture, particularly in Haiti, but also in Cuba, in Trinidad, in Brazil, and in Louisiana. This investigation resulted in the monograph *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (2 vols., 1938), which by reason of its breadth and detail of documentation still retains its place as a classic of

African ethnography. In addition to this monograph, Herskovits produced two other major contributions to the study of Dahomey in collaboration with his wife, *An Outline of Dahomaen Religious Belief* (1933) and, much later, *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (1958).

One of the important by-products of the foregoing research was the light that it shed on the African sources of New World Negro slaves; these sources differed significantly in different New World areas and were reflected in the varying patterns of African survivals. It is not too much to say that with this pioneering series of researches Herskovits virtually founded Afroamerican studies as a scientific field in its own right. Outside of its purely scientific value, this work had important implications for the way in which the Negro in the New World conceived himself and was conceived of by others, at a time when the prevailing view of both Negro and non-Negro was that the Negro of the Americas was, so to speak, a man without a past. Though today the idea of a Negro past is generally accepted, at the time the demonstration of the cultural continuity between Africa and America was profoundly new, and disturbing of generally held stereotypes. The work which more than any other put in a broader and more generally accessible framework the results of these researches was *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1942). Its very title embodies the main thrust of the work, that the myth regarding the Negro past is that he has no past.

It was characteristic of Herskovits that while his work was thus grounded in the concrete yet broadly conceived historical reality of the Negro in Africa and America, he never lost sight of the ultimate concern of such work, namely, its relevance to the problems of the science of anthropology as a whole. Since the study of the Negro involved, as it did, the wholesale transplantation of populations from one hemisphere to another by an external agent and a wide variety of patterns of

interaction among Negro, Indian, and Caucasian in the New World, it could not be understood in terms of descriptions of aboriginal life abstracted from the effects of more recent outside influences, as was the practice of classical ethnographic description. This was coming to be realized more and more by anthropologists during the 1930s. The study of the contact of cultures as a scientific field in its own right was emerging and came to be called acculturation in the United States. It was not surprising, then, that Herskovits was appointed by the Social Science Research Council in 1936 as one of a committee of three distinguished anthropologists numbering, in addition to Herskovits, Ralph Linton and Robert Redfield, for the purpose of drafting a memorandum which would define the scope and content of acculturation as a topic of scientific investigation. The resulting document was widely disseminated and exercised a considerable influence on the development of the area. To this field, Herskovits made a further substantial contribution in his book *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact* (New York, 1938).

To the impressive list of Herskovits' achievements prior to the outbreak of World War II there should be added at least one further major effort, his pioneer work *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples* (New York, 1940). This was the first full-fledged work by an anthropologist devoted to the economics of nonliterate people, as distinct from their technology, a traditional field of anthropological investigation. In this volume, Herskovits sought to build a bridge between the discipline of economics and anthropology. On the one hand, he sought to broaden the scope of economics, which in practice confined its attention to industrial societies, by providing a body of empirical data regarding the economic life of tribal societies to replace the hypothetical constructs in vogue among economists. On the other hand, he sought to stimulate the study of economic institutions in the proper sense among anthropologists, who

up to then had mainly concerned themselves with the details of technology and of custom and ceremonial surrounding economic activities. Thus he sought to advance economics as the general science of human economic behavior by stimulating the collection by anthropologists of quantitative and other data relevant to the theoretic concerns of the economist.

In this area there was indeed a considerable change for which Herskovits could claim much credit. Thus he was able to state in his introduction to the extensively revised edition of his earlier work, which appeared in 1952 under the title *Economic Anthropology*:

“The neglect by earlier anthropologists of the economic aspects of the cultures they studied no longer exists. Under present conventions of field-work no anthropologist of competence takes as synonymous the technology of a people with their economics, or considers it sufficient if he only studies the canon of ownership, where problems of differentials in wealth and position are his concern.”

During World War II, Herskovits served as Chief Consultant for African Affairs of the Board of Economic Warfare. Africa, of course, played an important strategic role in the conduct of the war. It became painfully evident that American scholarly neglect of Africa, as of other non-Western areas, was a severe handicap to the national interest.

It was one of the postwar outcomes of this situation that in 1947 Herskovits was requested by the Carnegie Corporation to institute interdisciplinary research and teaching of African topics at Northwestern University. This resulted in 1948 in the formation of the Program of African Studies, the first of its kind in the United States. Herskovits held the position of director of the program for the remainder of his career.

The Northwestern program was noteworthy for the number of professional Africanists it produced, particularly in Herskovits' own field of anthropology. Some notion of the scope of

the program and the scholarly results it produced can be obtained from a perusal of *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*. This volume, which appeared in 1959, was jointly edited by Herskovits and William Bascom, the latter a pupil of Herskovits and in his own right a notable folklorist and museologist. It consisted exclusively of contributions by scholars who had received training at Northwestern University. The general theme of the book, as indicated by the title, was closely connected with culture change, which has already been indicated as a central theoretic concern of Herskovits. The title reflects Herskovits' contention that stability is no more to be taken for granted than change. The basic continuities of culture require explanations also, for, as stated in the joint preface in reference to the political changes in Africa leading to the independence of many African states, ". . . these surprisingly rapid political changes have not destroyed the continuity of African cultures."

In the period following World War II, the rapid political and economic changes and the factor of American involvement in technical assistance programs produced a growing interest in the study of change in non-Western areas. What distinguished Herskovits' approach as reflected in this book is the unwillingness to confine or isolate the study of stability and change to socioeconomic and political aspects. Thus there are one or more papers in *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* devoted to language, art, music, indigenous social organization, economics, and religion.

With the constantly expanding role of Africa in world affairs in the postwar years, those engaged in the formulation of American policy in Africa turned to Herskovits as the outstanding expert on Africa. In 1959 he prepared *United States Foreign Policy: Africa* for the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate.

Also in 1959 Herskovits became a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

In addition to the direction of the African program at Northwestern and the chairmanship of the Anthropology Department, which he relinquished in the late 1950s, Herskovits devoted much of his energy to activities which were of value to the anthropological profession as a whole, notably as editor of the third edition of the *International Directory of Anthropologists* (1950) and as editor (1949-1953) of the *American Anthropologist*, the journal of the American Anthropological Association.

In spite of these heavy commitments in the postwar years, Herskovits continued to be a highly productive scholar. The sweeping changes which anthropology had undergone during and after the war, and its rapid expansion both as an undergraduate subject and in its traditional graduate school role, resulted in a rising demand for general anthropology texts, of which there were very few at the time. Herskovits' *Man and His Works* (New York, 1948) helped in large measure to fill this *desideratum*. As might have been expected from Herskovits, the work was notable for its breadth of topical coverage and its command of an enormous literature. It was widely adopted as a textbook in introductory courses. In view of its considerable length, however (673 pages), it was reissued in an abridged form with the title *Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1955).

There has been occasion earlier to mention two of Herskovits' other books which appeared during the period 1950-1960, his biography of Franz Boas (1953) and his extensive work on Dahomean folklore which appeared under the title *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* in 1958 and was written in collaboration with his wife, Frances.

Herskovits' last major work was one which sought to analyze and put in historical perspective the vast changes undergone by the African continent and to which he had devoted so much of his life and energy. *The Human Factor in Changing Africa* is a veritable tour de force in summarizing and helping to

make comprehensible the vast panorama of change over the entire continent.

Another important aspect of Herskovits' work during this period was his collaboration with two psychologists, Marshall Segall and Donald T. Campbell, on cultural influences in perception. The results of these researches were published posthumously in 1966.

It was natural that Herskovits, who had always been a staunch proponent of the value and dignity of African culture, as indeed of all human cultures, should greet with enthusiasm the accession of independence of African states which had been under colonial rule. It was peculiarly fitting that his last public activity was the major role he took in the organization of the First International Congress of Africanists, held in Ghana in December 1962. Traditionally, Africanists had met as a subsection of the International Congress of Orientalists. It was at the Moscow Congress of this latter association that Herskovits, together with I. I. Potekhin of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, took the decisive step of organizing African Studies internationally, independent of Oriental Studies. The Congress at Accra, at which Herskovits delivered a notable address summarizing the history of Africanist studies, was remarkable also in that Africans themselves were prominently involved in the work of the Congress. It was hardly two months after this Congress that Herskovits passed away in Evanston. As evident from the foregoing sketch, which summarizes but a portion of his numberless activities, Herskovits was a man of truly extraordinary breadth and energy. His impact on the fields in which he was active is still with us. None who came into contact with his writings could fail to profit from his inquiring mind and his outstanding gift for scientific synthesis. Those who had the privilege of knowing him personally will never forget his warm and vibrant personality. In particular his students, among whom the present writer is proud to number himself,

can attest that there was no limit to his loyalty and willingness to provide guidance and stimulation.

HONORS AND DISTINCTIONS

DEGREES AND PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

Ph.B., University of Chicago, 1920

A. M., Columbia University, 1921

Ph.D., Columbia University, 1923

Lecturer in Anthropology, Columbia University, 1924-1927; Howard University, 1925

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1927-1930

Associate Professor of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1931-1935

Professor of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1935-

Professor of African Affairs, Northwestern University, 1960-

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND OTHER MEMBERSHIPS

Fellow in Anthropology, Board of Biological Sciences, NRC, 1923-1926

Chairman, Committee on African Anthropology, and Chairman, Committee on International Relations in Anthropology of the Division of Anthropology and Psychology, NRC, 1942-1950

Chairman, Committee on Negro Studies, American Council of Learned Societies, 1939-1950

Fellow, National Association of Sciences, AAAS (Vice President, 1934)

American Anthropological Association (President, Central Section, 1939; Executive Board, 1947)

Editor, *American Anthropologist*, 1949-1952

African Studies Association (President, 1957-1958)

Member, American Association of Physical Anthropology

American Folklore Society (President, 1945)

Société des Africanistes de Paris

International African Institute (Executive Council)

HONORS

Guggenheim Memorial Fellow, 1937-1938

Officer, Order of Honor and Merit, Haiti

Officer, Order of Orange-Nassau, The Netherlands

Honorary Fellow, Royal Netherlands Geographical Association

Honorary Fellow, Royal Anthropological Institute

President's Fellow, Northwestern University, 1960

Viking Fund Medalist, 1953

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

- Am. Anthropol. = American Anthropologist
 Am. J. Phys. Anthropol. = American Journal of Physical Anthropology
 Am. J. Sociol. = American Journal of Sociology
 Am. Soc. Rev. = American Sociological Review
 Human Biol. = Human Biology
 Internat. Soc. Sci. Bull. = International Social Science Bulletin
 J. Am. Folklore = Journal of American Folklore
 J. Negro Hist. = Journal of Negro History
 J. Roy. Anthropol. Inst. = Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute
 J. Social Forces = Journal of Social Forces (later changed to Social Forces)
 Revta. Bras. = Revista do Brasil
 S. W. J. Anthropol. = Southwestern Journal of Anthropology

1923

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1924

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1925

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1926

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