

# **PAUL RADIN**

**an attempt at an intellectual biography**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The rooms of the 13<sup>th</sup> century house that serves as the Department of Cultural Anthropology in Basel used to be haunted by the presence of three ethnological ancestors. The first was Boas, present in the curriculum. The second was Malinowski, present in the spirit of fieldwork and the huge, old, black and white photographs from Oceania hanging in the rooms and stairwells. The third one, less obviously and prominently present, was Paul Radin. He had been regularly working in the library, for a few years, and from the stories my professors would tell I could just imagine him walking across the square in front of the *Münster*, inspired by the sight and the atmosphere. That image, of course, sprung from a vivid imagination and my own inspiration. However, I have always kept that picture of Radin – a tremendous ethnologist too often forgotten, but always present by the influence of his work. This attempt to sketch his intellectual biography may neither start nor end on the *Münsterplatz* in Basel, but that picture is there, hovering in the background, like his influence on my thinking.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Paul Radin was born on April second 1883 in Lodz, then part of the Russian Empire, today in Poland. His father was a doctor (Dietschy 1960:12) and/or a rabbi of the reform movement (Du Bois 1960:ix). Ultimately, there were to be five children in the family, three sons, of whose Paul was the third, and two daughters. In 1884, the Radin family left Russia for Elmira, New York, and in 1890 moved to New York City, where the two daughters died in a scarlet fever epidemic (Du Bois 1960:ix).

After his 1902 graduation, Paul Radin began to study zoology at Columbia, but then went to Europe in 1905 and changed his studies to anthropology. He first studied in Munich, then, in 1906, went to Berlin. During the two years in Europe, he also spent time in Prague and Florence. In 1907,

Radin returned to Columbia to study anthropology under Boas with a minor in history, and earned his Ph.D. in 1911, after having married in 1910. Among the students he met there were Kroeber, Wissler, Sapir, Lowie, and Speck (Dietschy 1960:12; Du Bois 1960:x, xi). In those years, from 1908 to 1913, he also made several field trips to the Winnebago, whose culture would remain his special interest for the rest of his life (Sapir 1961:65).

His career began with the Bureau of American Ethnology, where he worked from 1911 to 1912, when he got a joint fellowship from Columbia and Harvard for the study of Zapotec mythology and linguistics. After that, he and his friend Sapir went to work for the Geological Survey of Canada, for which Radin studied the southeast Ontario Ojibwa for four years (Du Bois 1960:xi). From 1918 to 1920, Radin worked at Berkeley with Kroeber and Lowie, another friend, before going on to Europe, to work with Rivers at Cambridge until 1924. In those years, he also became widely interested in the works of C. G. Jung in Zurich (Dietschy 1960:12; Du Bois 1960:xiii). Radin returned to America in 1925, to do fieldwork among the Ottawa for the University of Michigan, then received a fellowship by the Rockefeller foundation. In 1927, he received an appointment at Fisk University, and in 1930 he went back to Berkeley. He worked on Patwin, a Penutian language of California, and did fieldwork among the minority groups of the San Francisco area. He also met and married his second wife, Doris Woodward. From 1941 to 1944, Radin taught at Black Mountain College, then returned to Berkeley until 1949. For the next three years, he lectured in Sweden and at the Eranos conferences in Ascona, Switzerland (Du Bois 1960:xiii-xv). From 1948 to his death, he was also one of the editors of the Indiana University Publications in Anthropology and Linguistics. In 1952, he finally took up residence in Lugano, and taught at the C.-G.-Jung-Institut in Zurich, while working in Basel on grants from the Bollingen Foundation and giving lectures at Oxford, Cambridge, and Manchester. In 1957, he went to Brandeis University (Dietschy 1960:12,13; Du Bois 1960:xv).

Paul Radin died on 21 February 1959 in New York City (Sapir 1961:65).

## Personality

Sapir (1961:67) says that Radin "can best be described as an individual." This seems to be a very neutral way to comment on Radin's character, loved by some (Dietschy 1960), and always at the very least respected (Du Bois 1960; Hoijer 1959). For an impression of what the establishment might have thought of him, one should read Marett's (1934) book review. Radin, both Dietschy (1960:12) and Du Bois (1960:xvi) say, was a man of many, and sometimes contrary facets, but "of one piece." Somebody "who respects himself, as he respects others, for integral integrity" (Du Bois 1960:xv). "Radin is a rational and skeptical man, even if at times he has appeared unreasonable," Du Bois (1960:xv) defends him, discussing his "characteristic unwillingness to either label or be labeled." "For seventy years, he has been indestructibly himself," she says (Du Bois 1960:xvi), a fact that Sapir (1961:67) comments on as, "He preferred to remain himself, an independent student following his own interests." Hoijer (1959:843) thinks of Radin as the "most informal and thoroughly scholarly teacher." Dietschy (1960:12) says that Radin stayed "*ein ewiger Student*," who "*lieber diskutierte als dozierte*." It was no wonder, he says, that the eternal wanderer Radin's subject would become the study of the adaptation of individuals to the cultures they had been born into. Sapir (1961:67) recalls that Radin "once emphatically remarked that he had turned down more job offers than any other anthropologist."

"Radin possessed that rare courage of remaining true to his convictions in a world where this quality is not highly rewarded," Vidich (1965:406) notes. One of the instances where this "personal choice" (Vidich 1965:406) clearly shows is in his 1932 book *Social Anthropology*. He dedicates the book "in admiration" to Felix Frankfurter, who a few years ago had written a critical book on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial (Frankfurter 1961). Moves such as this were probably what people thought of as fighting against windmills, too (Marret 1934:116). But as Radin (1934:316) points out, without any illusions at being able to change anything, "at times it is of value to tilt against them simply in order to call the attention of the world to the fact that they are present." In view of this statement, it truly "is perhaps understandable that the choice Radin made is not made more

frequently because the price for making it is a high one, no less than professional ostracism and exclusion from an ability unconsciously to participate in the dominant ethos of the Western world" (Vidich 1965:406). Or as Diamond (1960:xviii) puts it:

"At a time of low civil courage and wild careerism, amply reflected in the academy, but evident everywhere in our civilization, Radin is a figure that heartens. [...] Radin's fierce individualism, his simplicity, his passion for diversity and love of culture, his downright intelligence, a rarer trait than realized among intellectuals, have kept him on the margin of the orthodox academy while enabling him to contribute mightily to the field he loves. He has never retreated into jargon, nor has he deflected his concern from the great, recurring, troubling themes in human history. Above all, he has never merely analyzed the lives of people called primitive; by some alchemy of insight he transmuted himself into their spokesman."

Being a spokesman might have come natural for Radin. He did not go to extremes to please, but mostly everybody, as far as I can tell, respected him. "He is not above being disliked; it does not displease him. Yet, liked or disliked, he is usually loved, for love is what he subtly demands in return for the gift of his being, the man and his work inseparable" (Diamond 1960:xvii).

Radin's personality, and his love, is perhaps best seen in his obituary for Robert Lowie (Radin 1958), on, or rather for whom he writes four pages without even once expressing anything but respect and mourning. This is the second instance, besides the dedication of his book to Frankfurter, that he uses a Schiller quotation, for the fulfillment of which, I guess, he strove, too:

"Wer den Besten seiner Zeiten genug getan / Der hat gelebt für alle Zeiten."

## **ETHNOGRAPHERS**

Radin did not think too much of method and theory in ethnology. His basic idea, I think, was that anybody who did not have his huge background was not to be called an ethnologist, and those that had his background would automatically agree with him on the method. "Certainly for ethnology,

any individual who has received the requisite training and who possesses, in a moderate degree, the attributes of honesty, intelligence, and humility has all that is necessary," he (Radin 1987:cxvi) says in the introduction to his *The Method and Theory of Ethnology*. "Discussions on theory and methodology," Radin (1987:cxvii) goes on, "so a very acute English art critic has recently observed, caused the chatter on the scaffolding of the Tower of Babel."

Radin's approach to culture is the individual (Radin 1987:41,42,183-252). This approach, I think, might have largely been framed by the way Radin saw himself as a human being as such and in his culture.

"Viewed psychologically, it might be contended that the history of civilization is largely the account of the attempts of man to forget his transformation from an animal into a human being. Becoming conscious must assuredly have been a painful and traumatic experience, one to which he offered a most tenacious and continuous resistance. And he was right" (Radin 1953:3).

The history of mankind and of civilization being thus a religious history, it is not surprising that Radin focuses on myth as a key to the interpretation and understanding of culture. However, "It may seem virtually unbelievable that, to this day, Radin is in practice the only anthropologist in the narrow sense of the word [...] who has approached the question from its most significant aspect - that of the cultural functions of thought" (Zil'berman 1972:392,393).

Basic to an understanding of Radin's idea about these cultural functions of thought is, I think, an understanding of his ethical requirements on humans and especially ethnographers, who are necessarily oscillating between the opposition of humility and *hybris* since the day they got conscious.

### **Humility and *hybris***

Vidich (1965:383) is probably right in saying that for Radin, in order to understand a different culture, one has to alienate oneself from one's own, in that case the Western culture, and that this

creates problems because anthropology is a part of this culture. As Goldenweiser (1933:349) says in his review of *Social Anthropology*: "Dr. Radin has admirably succeeded in being a Winnebago but finds it more difficult to cease being one." Academia might such have thought that Radin had a problem of *going native*, of turning his back on them (see also Hojier 1959:840,841). But Radin's problem, I think, lay deeper, and can be exemplified by a look at his work on the Trickster cycle.

Trickster is, for Radin (i.e. 1948:30), not only a vent for "expressing all the irritations, the dissatisfactions, the maladjustments, in short, the negativisms and frustrations of Winnebago society." He is also the constant reminder that only through the limitations of culture and society can humans grow and mature. This is the Aristotelian thought of *zoon politikon*. *Hybris* on this point, which "life is always forcing upon us," "must end in tragedy and disaster" (Radin 1953:318). No wonder mankind offered resistance to the traumatic experience of becoming conscious: it subjected us to a constant battle against our own *hybris*. Now, if somebody doing ethnography has to leave his own society, but cannot really join a different one (Radin 1987:101,170), then she/he is not even just in danger of falling to *hybris*, anymore; that person, an ethnographer, is actually by definition living in *hybris*. This is why Radin demands humility from an ethnographer, just as he demands it from an historian: "Modesty and a due humility in the presence of the long and chequered course of human events and the forces at work behind them" (Radin 1947:624). Modesty and humility thus also means a reserved interpretation of ethnographic data, and recognition of the limits set for such interpretation. The only "adequate and accurate" presentation of ethnographic data is one "that is wholly free from manifest preconceptions and theoretical bias" (Radin 1932:viii).

It thus comes as no surprise that Radin was more interested in ethnographers than in ethnography (Dietschy 1960:13). After all, he says that,

"Paradoxically as it may seem, it is nevertheless a fact that few people are, on the whole, so unfitted by temperament to study the simpler aspects of the life of primitive people, and by implication their emotional and intellectual manifestations, as the average cultured scholar and

university-trained ethnologist. It is really a marvel that they have done so well" (Radin 1927:11).

And it should also come as no surprise, and no paradox, that academia had a slight problem with these positions and the critique following from them. Nobody likes to be ethnographically studied and criticised, but especially not ethnographers themselves.

### **Honesty and Integrity**

The acknowledgment of one's limitation is, I think, what Radin means by "honesty," and it is his public acknowledgment that others termed "integrity." It is his absolute view on intellectual integrity that probably caused some problems with his environment.

"By all means let the maker of bricks make them as soundly as he can; but I cannot see how the criteria of his relatively humble handicraft can be applied offhand to the disparagement of the architect's design" says Marett (1934:117) in an analogy to ethnographers and humanity's knowledge. If I may respond for Radin, then the maker of bricks has to make his bricks in an attempt at perfection, because he does not and can not know the architect's design: it simply is not there, but is constructed with the bricks. If one brick is bad, then the building might tumble down. If the supposed or self-appointed architect looks upon the brick making as a humble handicraft, he is blinded by *hybris*; if the brick maker is not attempting perfection, he is not integer. Attempting perfection, for the ethnographer, means to conduct long term field studies – a lifetime (Radin 1987:178) – in an attempt to really understand the people.

The best example I can think of to illuminate Radin's idea of integrity is a story Bateson (1987:72,73) is telling. Like the people in this story, Radin basically chose integrity over existence. But I don't think he would have expressed this as a choice. For him, it was a human necessity.

## ETHNOGRAPHY

“The task, let me insist, is always the same: a description of a specific period, and as much of the past and as much of the contacts with other cultures as is necessary for the elucidation of the particular period. No more” (Radin 1987:184).

No more, he says, and yet should have said, No less. This is the sort of theory that drives people crazy who are looking for an exact method, with a list of proceedings to follow, because it depends on common sense and a shared understanding of the "obvious". It, of course, is the obvious for Radin, and a common sense that apparently was not that common, as can be seen by how Radin felt obliged to defend it; nevertheless, it is the obvious. Koppers (1934:589) was probably not the only one who looked for an exact method in vain. Radin (1947:624) may thus be right in his critique of Plato, but in fact, he also is drawing upon "great intellectual gifts, encyclopedic vision, and [a] religious-spiritual goal" to understand "man's cultural evolution." Radin's assumption of the differing influences on a culture by its "men of action" and its "thinkers" are not too far from the assumption of a cultural elite (Radin 1927; 1937; 1949:5). His axioms, his "ideas," seem not to differ terribly from Plato's, at least in the study of culture; for Plato, it is impossible to define the "Good", as one can only see it, and it seems that for Radin, it is impossible to define "culture".<sup>1</sup>

Radin's ethnography is based on accounts of individuals, interpreted in the knowledge of their personal history, the standing in their culture, and the cultural environment (Radin 1987:184-186). One of his most famous and influential work is his 1920 *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (Radin 1963). In its introduction, he states that ideally, an ethnographic account should come from a member of the society, or at least an investigator who became a member of the society he studies. But no well-qualified ethnologist, he says, is prepared to spend the necessary time – one's life – in a

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<sup>1</sup> I am not sure if this is true, but I have not found a definition of "culture" anywhere. As this is a position I have held for a long time (e.g. that "culture" can not be defined, but only seen and experienced), and have drawn from Plato, amongst others, I might read it into Radin, however.

traditional community. Even though members of a society are mostly not able to give "a well-rounded and complete account" of their culture, however, their

"personal reminiscences and impressions, inadequate as they are, are likely to throw more light on the workings of the mind and emotions of primitive man than any amount of speculation from a sophisticated ethnologist or ethnological theorist" (Radin 1963:2).

Ultimately, the use of autobiographical material led to *The Culture of the Winnebago: As Described by Themselves* (Radin 1949). And I think that this title is about as close as one can come to Radin's ideal ethnography.

### **Culture and individual - psychoanalysis**

The approach to the individual is psychology. But in contrast to C. G. Jung, with whom he was in contact from 1920 on (Sullivan 1982:222), Radin does not apply psychology to the study of mankind. He tries "to interpret [culture] in terms of human personalities and not in terms of generalized men and women who are made to serve as a kind of academic cement for vague ideas and still vaguer emotions" (Radin 1937:vii). The aim of looking at the individual is "not to obtain autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he had grown up" (Radin 1963:2).

In the end, Radin (1987:267), too, wants to know "what constitutes human nature." And to achieve this knowledge, he can not only look at the "representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability." In both, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (Radin 1927) and *Primitive Religion* (Radin 1938), he contrasts two extreme types of temperament, the "man of action" and the "thinker," to which is added the division between the "religious" and the "non-religious man" (Radin 1953:37-104).

One should never forget, however, "that the manner in which they [the psychological types] are allowed to function in any given society is, in the last analysis, determined largely by the social-

economic structures which have been evolved" (Radin 1953:37,38). It is with the individual in culture that Radin begins his ethnology, and every human individual always has to live in culture. There is nothing like individual culture, just individual interpretations of culture, and cultures are not individuals, they are made up of individuals. Because this is so, psychoanalysis comes up with the wrong data if applied to the study of culture. However, it is very important in the analysis of the individual in a culture, and that data then can be used for the analysis of the culture as a whole; this analysis can only be an ethnological analysis, not a psychological one.

In fact, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, for example, is about the personage of the thinker (Radin 1927:388), but its implications bear directly on the culture as a whole, and as such on the average person.

### **Ethnology and literature studies**

Radin's ethnology, or at least his ethnography, is almost synonymous at times with literature studies. This does not mean that for him, in the postmodern sense, culture is text, but that the study of culture should start with the study of the culture's individuals' texts.

"The value of beginning with a document cannot be too strongly stressed. In elucidating culture we must begin with a fixed point, but this point must be one that has been given form by a member of the group described, and not by an alien observer" (Radin 1987:186).

Documents "given shape by a member of the group" are narratives, and Radin thus collects narratives in order to describe a culture; this is especially true for the Winnebago, but his method can be applied to all cultures.

After simply collecting texts (Radin 1914), and a conventional, if critical, look at the diffusion of texts in North America (Radin 1915), Radin finds his own method of working with texts. Beginning with *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (Radin 1963), he publishes the texts as given to him, with careful personal and ethnological annotations. The texts are either published in English (Radin 1963; 1945; 1948; 1956), or in both, Winnebago and the English translation (Radin

1949; 1950). If only the translation is given, Radin always explains how it was arrived at. Next to *The Autobiography*, his most famous work of ethnological textual interpretation is *The Trickster* (Radin 1956), respectively its German predecessor, *Der göttliche Schelm* (Radin, Kerényi & Jung 1954). Radin (1956:x) explains his attitude towards psychology, ethnology, cultural variations, and texts in the context of the trickster:

"Our problem is thus basically a psychological one. In fact, only if we view it as primarily such, as an attempt by man to solve his problems inward and outward, does the figure of Trickster become intelligible and meaningful. But we cannot properly and fully understand the nature of these problems or the manner in which they have been formulated in the various Trickster myths unless we study these myths in their specific cultural environments and in their historic settings."

Radin is aware that by writing down the texts, or having them written down, by creating a written literature, something distinctively new is created. "In primitive mythology we are often dealing with literature in the true sense of the word," he states clearly (Radin 1915:2). And the implications of a written literature are more important than the fact that texts are written down instead of being related orally. For writing offers opportunity for "reflection, selection and correction," even though only to the thinker (Radin 1987:261-265; 1949:4,5). But because this new opportunity of reflection is meaningful only to the thinker, it does not corrupt the authenticity of the texts. After all, the thinker is supposed to reflect: writing only offers him a new, hitherto unexplored opportunity.

As I have tried to show above, determined by its beginning, the history of culture for Radin was primarily the history of religious thoughts, the constant attempt to fit mankind into the cosmos, to overcome the *hybris* implanted into him by consciousness (Radin 1937:6,7). Culture is not only religion, but religious thought might be called one of its essential starting points. Therefore, to understand a culture, one must understand its religion. And to understand religion, one must understand not only the role of the thinker, or "religious formulator" (Radin 1937:15) but also, "To understand primitive religions we must begin with his description and with his analysis of the

religious experience" (Radin 1953:103,104). And that is exactly what Radin tries to do in his textual and literary analyses.

### **IMPACT ON THE FIELD**

I would almost have simply answered "marginal," but that would not be true. In fact, I think that Radin had an important impact on the field; the problem is that everybody seems to forget about him. When stumbling upon Radin, he springs into mind, but two weeks later, he is forgotten. His thoughts are pervasive, but the fact that they come from him is not. Looking at the postmodernist critique, for example, I wonder how many times Radin should have been mentioned as a source for it, and how many times he was not; not because the people tried to hide their sources, but because they just did not know that Radin had actually said this or that. If it were possible (and it is not), it would be interesting to see how many people had actually read him, and how many of those who have ever mention him unless prompted, although his thoughts are clearly an influence in their own thinking. There seems to be something evasive about Radin, and I guess it is as much his seemingly common sense-approach to ethnology as it is his disturbingly honest personality. There is almost a Socratic theme in his character – he knows himself, and does not care about people who do not – and in his critique – he pushes and provokes in spite of seeing that this leads to him becoming a martyr of his cause. He is well aware of running up against windmills, and aware he must have been of the consequences. Maybe Goldenweiser was right, and he really had become a Winnebago, at least in character, or maybe Radin (1927:34,35) had discovered not a summation of "primitive man's viewpoint," but more one of his own: "Express yourself completely but know yourself completely and accept the consequences of your own personality and of your actions." The fact that he did not have a direct impact on the field for sure came not only, or not primarily from his theories, but also from his personality.

"[Radin] knows a secret which is as old as the world. Other people are both different from you and similar to you. All men have much in common. And the business of telling secrets is mutual. The white man who wants to understand must remember that the Indian wants to understand him also. Mr. Radin both received and gave during those long months when Jasper Blowsnake committed the once mortal sin of repeating the Medicine Rite" (van Doren 1945:xiii, xiv).

I have only looked at one of the many aspect of Radin's work, his ethnography, and have left out for example his linguistic interests. It is in books as *Social Anthropology* (Radin 1932), *World of Primitive Man* (Radin 1953), and *Indians of South America* (Radin 1942) that he is applying his wide knowledge and interests to the interpretation of cultures. But always, he tries to present his data in a way that is complying with his ethnographic ethical views, which he defends so convincingly in his *Method and Theory* (Radin 1987).

Just like Marett (1934:117) says, "Mr. Radin's short-hand descriptions of my colleagues reveal to me very little about any of them – except Mr. Radin", so, too, this description of Paul Radin might reveal more about me than him. However, to paraphrase Radin (1934:316), I hope that no one has difficulty in determining what I mean, and that is all that matters.

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