
”Culture: the diffusion controversy” (1927) revisited: archaeology, anthropology and the hyperdiffusionists

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Résumé

This paper focuses on intellectual interactions among London-based researchers through the 1910s to the 1930s who engaged in debates on the origins of early culture, and aims to clarify the implications of the diffusion controversy for the wider academic split between archaeology and anthropology.

The question of whether early culture spread like an epidemic from a single, higher society, or whether, on the contrary, the making of culture was part of the fabric of every society regardless of its place on the social ‘evolutionary ladder’, provided the backdrop for a major split within anthropology in the 1920s. The split, opposing G. Elliot Smith and B. Malinowski, culminated with the publication in 1927 of *Culture: the Diffusion Controversy*, which may be seen as the final act of the British School of Diffusionism before its relegation to obscurity. For not only did Malinowski win the battle of ideas, he appears to have bankrupted Elliot Smith’s University College London (UCL) Anatomy Group, by convincing the Rockefeller Foundation, one of the main sponsors of the UCL Group, to reallocate funding in 1927 to his own branch of anthropology at the London School of Economics (Champion 2003, 125).

Diffusionism was not rendered completely extinct however. As social anthropology under Malinowski became what has sometimes been described as a ”science of acculturation” (Trigger 1998, 134), archaeology under V. Gordon Childe became the torchbearer of moderate diffusionism, through its emphasis on prehistoric migrations and the spread of agriculture. This is particularly evident in Gordon Childe’s early work *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929). The precise extent of Gordon Childe’s involvement with the British School of Diffusionism remains unclear. He is credited for ”help in preparation” in W.J. Perry’s second edition of *Growth of Civilisation* (1926) and he may have been a more active member of the UCL Anatomy Group than is usually reported in the literature (Stout 2008, 93).

References:

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