On the Concept of Types

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The Type Concept Revisited

SEVERAL years ago, Kluckhohn (1939) upbraided anthropologists in general and archeologists in particular for failure to examine critically the assumptions and concepts which lie at the foundations of their methodologies. Perhaps this well justified censure has prompted the healthy introspection that has developed in the past decade and resulted in valuable papers such as those by Rouse (1939), Krieger (1944), Brew (1946), Taylor (1948), and Ehrich (1950).

As soon as students of cultural phenomena cease to be satisfied with comparisons of mere qualities of cultural traits and begin also to treat their data quantitatively, it becomes apparent that the basic conceptual tool of cultural research is that of the type. To the present it is the archeologists who have been most concerned with the formulation and use of cultural types, but this hardly redounds to the credit of this branch of the profession. Archeologists have been forced into this position by the necessity for reconstructing cultural histories from a very limited range of cultural material. Although the term has been used indiscriminately, in practice the typological concept has been thoughtfully applied almost entirely to ceramics. The principles are the same, however, for all other aspects of culture, and we may expect to see it more widely used as sufficient evidence accumulates to make it possible and necessary.

To utilize the concept of type efficiently, it is very necessary that the cultural student have a clear idea of what a type is, how it is defined, and what purposes it may serve. At present there seems to be some confusion. The debate seems to center around the question of the “reality” of cultural types; a debate which is very similar to that carried on by the biologists for a number of years in regard to the significance of the species concept. To state it clearly, the question may be put this way: “Do cultural types exist in the phenomena so that they may be discovered by a capable typologist?” This is an important question for the answer not only determines how investigators may proceed in identifying types, but it also determines how types may be employed in solving cultural problems.

Both Rouse (1939) and Krieger (1944) have given excellent discussion of the application of the concept of type but have failed to clarify this debated point. Neither am I entirely satisfied with the statement in Phillips, Ford and Griffin (1951:61–64). Recently the question has again been brought up as a result of an article by A. C. Spaulding (1953) which describes a method for discovering cultural types by statistical methods. This discussion takes for granted the assumption that types do exist in culture and may be discovered by competent methodologies. This I doubt.
Perhaps it will clarify the problem to say a word about the history of the type concept, for the purposes of classification of archeological material have undergone a change beginning in this country during the second and third decades of this century. Initially archeological classifications were made for the purpose of describing collections, and the smallest divisions of the items were frequently called types. These groupings were defined without reference to the temporal and spatial coordinates of culture history. Where chronological information is lacking such descriptive classifications are the only sort that can be made and are extremely useful. A good example of such a classification is S. K. Lothrop's (1926) analysis of pottery collections from Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

The classifying of ceramics into type groupings that are designed to serve as measuring devices for culture history began in the southwestern United States and is now standard practice among American archeologists. Descriptive systematization is subordinated to the necessity for emphasizing spatial and temporal change in the material. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the word "type" has been retained for this new function because to some it seems to carry a connotation of its earlier descriptive usage. Krieger (1944: 272) has stated the current purpose of formulating types in the following words:

Thus the purpose of a type in archaeology must be to provide an organizational tool which will enable the investigator to group specimens into bodies which have demonstrable historical meaning in terms of behavior patterns. Any group which may be labelled a "type" must embrace material which can be shown to consist of individual variations in the execution of a definite constructional idea; likewise, the dividing lines between a series of types must be based upon demonstrable historical factors, not, as is often the case, upon the inclinations of the analyst or the niceties of descriptive orderliness.

Spaulding (1953:305) seems to agree that to be useful each type must have historical significance: "Historical relevance in this view is essentially derived from the typological analysis; a properly established type is the result of sound inferences concerning the customary behavior of the makers of the artifacts and cannot fail to have historical meaning." I certainly am in agreement with both these authors that to be useful, each type must have a limited range in time and space and thus have historical significance.

The discussion that follows will retrace some of the same arguments set forth by Rouse and Krieger but will consider typology from a slightly different angle. Instead of emphasizing the problem from the point of view of archeological specimens, I shall examine the concept as it would apply to a living culture. Further, to make the task easier and to attempt to clarify basic problems which the typologist must face, this will be fictitious culture history which has not been subjected to the complicating factors that operate in all actual histories. These factors are barriers to diffusion such as uneven population distribution, natural obstacles to communication, political and linguistic boundaries, or boundaries between competing cultural items of different geographic origin. Neither will it be subjected to the forces that speed and retard