

# Diffusionism: British, German, and American

## Introduction

Diffusionism is a major theoretical perspective in anthropology that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It developed as a critique of unilinear evolutionism, which claimed that all human societies evolve through the same fixed stages—from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Diffusionists rejected this linear model and instead argued that most cultural traits, technologies, and practices do not arise independently in different societies. Rather, they spread (or “diffuse”) from one society to another through contact, migration, trade, or conquest.

According to diffusionist thought, cultural similarities observed across different societies are usually the result of borrowing and transmission—not parallel invention. This marked a significant shift in anthropological thinking, placing more emphasis on historical processes, interaction, and cross-cultural influences rather than internal, isolated development.

Diffusionism developed into three main schools: the **British**, the **German**, and the **American**, each with its own assumptions, methods, and key thinkers. Together, they contributed to a better understanding of how cultures change and interact, though each also had significant limitations.

## 1. British School of Diffusionism: Hyper-Diffusionism

### Origins and Key Thinkers

The British school, often termed **hyper-diffusionism**, was developed in the early 20th century by anthropologists such as **Grafton Elliot Smith**, **William J. Perry**, and to a lesser extent, **W.H.R. Rivers**.

Smith and Perry proposed that nearly all major cultural inventions originated in a single place—**Ancient Egypt**—and were then transmitted to the rest of the world. This school argued that early humans lacked creativity and innovation, and thus cultural advances could only have come from one advanced civilization.

### Core Beliefs and Concepts of British Diffusionism

The British school of diffusionism—especially represented by scholars like Grafton Elliot Smith and W.J. Perry—was based on the idea that certain important cultural features did not develop independently in many parts of the world. Instead, they believed that these features had a **common origin** and then **diffused** or spread from one major center of civilization to the rest of the world.

## 1. Heliolithic Culture Complex

One of the central ideas of British diffusionism was the concept of the **Heliolithic Culture Complex**. The term “heliolithic” combines two ideas:

- *Helio* (meaning sun)
- *Lithic* (meaning stone)

They believed that a **bundle of related cultural traits**—which appeared in many ancient societies—actually came from a single source, probably **Ancient Egypt**.

These traits included:

- **Sun worship** (as seen in solar temples and rituals)
- **Megalithic architecture** (large stone structures like Stonehenge or pyramids)
- **Mummification of the dead**
- **Divine kingship** (where rulers were considered gods or descended from gods)
- **Use of gold ornaments and complex metallurgy**
- **Calendar systems and astronomy**

These were not seen as separate inventions by different societies, but as a **package** that originated in one place and then **spread globally** through migration and contact—especially along **sea routes**.

**Example:** The **pyramids of Egypt** and the **step pyramids of Mesoamerica** (like those built by the Mayans or Aztecs) were seen by British diffusionists as too similar to have been invented independently. They argued that **Egyptians must have influenced the peoples of the Americas**, possibly through ancient sea travel.

However, modern archaeology has shown that while both cultures built pyramid-like structures, they **served different purposes** and **emerged in very different time periods**.

- Egyptian pyramids were **tombs for pharaohs** built between **2600–1500 BCE**.
- Mesoamerican pyramids were often **temples or ceremonial centers**, built much later (starting around **500 BCE onward**).
- This is now considered a classic case of **independent invention**—where two societies, facing similar challenges or religious needs, developed similar solutions **on their own**.

## 2. Stimulus Diffusion (W.H.R. Rivers)

Another major figure in British diffusionism, **W.H.R. Rivers**, proposed a more moderate idea called **stimulus diffusion**. According to this, a society might **come**

**into contact with a foreign idea**—say through travelers or traders—and then **develop its own version** of that idea based on its unique culture and needs. This doesn't require direct copying or full cultural transfer.

**Example:** In the **Torres Straits Islands** (between Australia and Papua New Guinea), Rivers noticed that local communities showed signs of foreign influence in tools and rituals, which may have come from Melanesian or Indonesian contacts. However, these were **not exact copies**—local societies **adapted and changed** the ideas to fit their own traditions.

### 3. Role of Sea Routes in Cultural Spread

British diffusionists especially emphasized the **importance of sea routes** in spreading culture. They believed that ancient mariners from Egypt or the Near East carried important knowledge and traditions across the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, and even to the Americas.

For instance, they suggested that:

- The **megalithic tombs** in **Britain** (like Stonehenge) and **Polynesia** (like Easter Island statues) might have come from the **same Egyptian source**, via sea voyages.
- The practice of **divine kingship** seen in ancient African and Pacific Island societies might also have **Egyptian origins**.

But again, **modern research has disproved** most of these theories. The timelines don't match, and there is **no archaeological evidence** of such long-distance sea contact in ancient times.

#### Criticisms

- **Monocentric Bias:** It wrongly assumed a single origin of culture, ignoring independent innovation.
- **Speculative Reasoning:** Lacked solid archaeological or historical evidence; based mainly on superficial similarities.
- **Eurocentric and Colonial Tone:** Implied that only “civilized” societies could innovate, reflecting colonial biases.
- **Dismissal of Agency:** Underestimated the creative potential of other cultures and societies.

Despite its flaws, the British school brought attention to the importance of cultural contact and the historical diffusion of ideas, laying a foundation for future debate.

## 2. German School of Diffusionism: Kulturkreis or Culture Circle Theory

### Origins and Key Thinkers

The German school developed independently and took a more systematic and moderate approach. Its key figures included **Friedrich Ratzel**, **Fritz Graebner**, **Wilhelm Schmidt**, and **Leo Frobenius**. They developed the **Kulturkreis (Culture Circle)** theory, which posited that culture traits originated in multiple centers and then spread to surrounding areas.

## **Core Ideas and Methodology of German Diffusionism**

The **German school of diffusionism** developed a different approach from the British school. While British diffusionists believed in a **single center of origin** (like Egypt), the **German diffusionists** argued that **many different centers**—called **culture circles**—gave rise to cultural developments. This approach was less ethnocentric and more detailed in its analysis of how cultures spread and evolved.

### **1. Polycentric Origins: The Idea of Multiple Cultural Centers**

German diffusionists, particularly **Fritz Graebner** and **Father Wilhelm Schmidt**, believed that **no single civilization** was the original source of all cultural traits. Instead, they proposed that **various regions of the world** independently developed their own sets of cultural practices. These regions were called **Kulturkreise** or **culture circles**.

- A **culture circle** was defined as a geographical area where a unique combination of cultural elements first emerged.
- From each culture circle, cultural traits would **spread outwards** and influence neighboring societies through contact and interaction.
- Over time, these traits would **overlap, mix, or get modified** as they moved across regions.

This approach helped anthropologists look at culture as a **complex mosaic** formed through centuries of movement and exchange.

Example: A culture circle might include a group of interconnected traits like:

- Use of clay pottery with similar patterns,
- Slash-and-burn agriculture,
- Worship of ancestor spirits,
- Tools made of polished stone.

By studying where these traits were **most concentrated and developed**, German diffusionists tried to **trace their original location**, and then **map their spread** to other areas.

### **2. Method of Cultural Reconstruction**

German diffusionists used a **comparative-historical method** to study how cultures changed over time. Their method included:

- **Mapping** cultural traits across geographical regions,
- **Comparing** these traits to identify patterns of similarity and difference,
- **Inferring** the direction of diffusion (i.e., which region was the source and which was the recipient),
- **Reconstructing** the historical sequence of culture contact and transformation.

This method was especially influential in the early 20th century as it encouraged anthropologists to look at **empirical data** (such as tools, rituals, or language forms) rather than just speculate from theory.

**Example:** Suppose a certain type of **drum** used in rituals is found in parts of Central Africa, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. German diffusionists would:

- Analyze the **design, materials, and use** of the drum in each region,
- Determine where the most complex and earliest form appeared,
- Propose that this region was the **origin point** of the drum tradition,
- Then trace how it was **transmitted** to other places.

### 3. Primitive Monotheism: Schmidt's Unique Contribution

**Wilhelm Schmidt** made a very distinctive claim in anthropology. He argued that the earliest human societies were not animistic or polytheistic, as evolutionists had said. Instead, they originally believed in a **High God**—a single, all-powerful, moral deity who ruled the universe. He called this idea **Primitive Monotheism**.

- Schmidt believed that this original belief in one God later **declined or fragmented** into **polytheism, ancestor worship, or spirit beliefs** due to cultural changes, contact, or loss of tradition.
- He based this theory on studies of **hunter-gatherer societies**, especially in Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia, where he claimed to find traces of a belief in a remote, all-powerful deity.

**Case Study:** Among some African groups, like the **Nuer of Sudan**, there is a belief in **Kwoth**, a supreme creator god. Schmidt saw this as evidence that early human religion may have centered around a single divine figure. However, modern anthropologists often caution that such beliefs may be influenced by **later religious contact** or may **not reflect a universal origin**.

### Criticisms of German Diffusionism

German diffusionism was a **rich and systematic approach**, but it also faced several criticisms:

- It assumed that all cultural similarities came from **historical diffusion**, ignoring the possibility of **independent invention**.

- The reconstruction of culture circles was often **based on subjective judgment** rather than solid archaeological or linguistic evidence.
- Schmidt’s theory of **Primitive Monotheism** was seen as **religiously biased**, especially since Schmidt was a Catholic priest, and many felt his interpretation reflected **Christian theological assumptions**.
- The model could become **too rigid**, categorizing cultures into fixed circles without accounting for **dynamic change, local agency, or innovation**.

### 3. American School of Diffusionism

#### Origins and Key Thinkers

The American approach to diffusionism emerged under the leadership of **Franz Boas** and his students such as **Clark Wissler, A.L. Kroeber, and Robert Lowie**. Unlike the British and German schools, the American school was grounded in **fieldwork, empirical observation, and historical particularism**.

#### Core Concepts

American Diffusionism grew in the early 20th century, especially among anthropologists trained by or influenced by Franz Boas. It developed as a **method of understanding cultural development in the Americas**—especially among Native American societies—by focusing on **how cultural traits spread from one group to another** across space and time.

Rather than proposing a **single origin point** like the British school (e.g., Egypt) or **culture circles** like the German school, American diffusionists believed in **multiple centers of innovation** and emphasized **historical processes of contact, borrowing, and adaptation**.

#### 1. Rejection of Universal Evolutionism

American diffusionists, especially Boasians, **rejected the idea of unilinear evolution**, which assumed that all societies pass through the same stages of development. Instead, they believed that:

- Cultures do not evolve along a straight path.
- Cultures grow and change by **borrowing** elements from other societies.
- Each society’s history is **unique** and shaped by local events and regional contacts.

#### 2. Focus on Culture Areas and Trait Complexes

A key tool developed in American diffusionism was the **concept of “culture areas”**—large geographic zones in which **neighboring societies share similar cultural traits** due to proximity and long-term interaction.

Anthropologists believed that cultural traits **diffused gradually across space**, not in random patterns but along environmental and social lines. These shared traits—also called **trait complexes**—could include:

- Material objects like pottery or weapons,
- Social practices like marriage systems or rituals,
- Technologies like agriculture or architecture.

**Example:** The **Southwest culture area** of the United States and northern Mexico includes groups like the **Pueblo, Apache, and Hopi**. These groups all shared:

- Adobe-style housing,
- Corn-based agriculture,
- Kiva-style ceremonial spaces,
- Clan-based social organization.

### 3. Stimulus Diffusion and Cultural Innovation

One of the most original contributions of American diffusionism is the concept of “**stimulus diffusion**.” This idea was especially associated with **A. L. Kroeber** and **Clark Wissler**, who noted that **sometimes it is not the cultural object that travels, but the idea behind it**.

- A community may **observe or hear about a cultural practice** from another group and then **create their own version** using local resources and ideas.
- This explains how societies may **develop similar-looking features** without copying them directly.

**Case Study:** A famous example is the **similarity between the Egyptian pyramids and Mesoamerican pyramids**. While early British diffusionists claimed that Mesoamerican pyramids were inspired by Egypt, American diffusionists argued that:

- These structures **emerged independently**, because both cultures valued large ceremonial monuments for religious and political reasons.
- The **concept of monumental architecture** may have been a **result of similar social needs**, not necessarily contact.

### 4. Mapping Diffusion: Age-Area Hypothesis

American diffusionists tried to **map the geographical spread of cultural traits**. One key method was the **Age-Area Hypothesis**, proposed by **Clark Wissler**.

- This hypothesis suggested that **traits found over a wider area are older**, because they have had more time to spread.
- Conversely, traits that are limited in space may be **newer or more localized**.

**Illustration:** Consider the distribution of **corn agriculture** across Native American societies. Since maize cultivation is found from Central Mexico to the Great Lakes and even into South America, Wissler and others proposed that it must have **originated early** in Mexico and then **diffused outward** over time.

## 5. Emphasis on Fieldwork and Ethnographic Data

Much like historical particularism, American diffusionism relied heavily on **empirical data** collected through:

- **Long-term ethnographic fieldwork,**
- **Participant observation,**
- **Detailed cultural mapping** of rituals, tools, myths, and languages.

This fieldwork allowed anthropologists to **trace the pathways of cultural traits** and **identify points of contact** between different groups.

**Example:** In the **Great Lakes region**, anthropologists studied how **canoe designs, ceremonial dances, and burial customs** spread among the Ojibwe, Menominee, and Iroquois tribes. The analysis showed how **inter-tribal relations and trade routes** facilitated diffusion.

## Criticisms of American Diffusionism

Despite its contributions, American diffusionism faced several criticisms:

### 1. Overemphasis on Borrowing

Critics argued that American diffusionists often **underplayed internal innovation**, focusing too much on borrowing and contact. Not all cultural traits result from diffusion—**independent invention** also plays a key role.

### 2. Lack of Explanation for Motivation

While diffusionism mapped how traits spread, it often failed to explain **why some traits were adopted and others rejected**, or why they changed meaning in new societies.

### 3. Passive View of Culture

American diffusionism sometimes treated societies as **passive recipients of external influences**, instead of **active agents** who interpret, modify, and resist cultural elements.

### 4. Limited Comparative Theory

Like Boasian anthropology, it did not attempt to build **unified theoretical models**. It remained **historical and descriptive**, rather than predictive or analytical.

## Comparison of the Three Schools

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>British School</b>	<b>German School</b>	<b>American School</b>
Key Thinkers	Smith, Perry, Rivers	Graebner, Schmidt, Frobenius	Boas, Wissler, Kroeber
Origin Model	Monocentric (Ancient Egypt)	Polycentric (multiple culture circles)	Multilinear and local
Evidence Base	Speculative, based on similarities	Trait distributions and comparative study	Empirical, fieldwork-based
Methodology	Historical analogy, assumption	Reconstruction from cultural complexes	Ethnographic and historical analysis
Criticisms	Eurocentric, speculative	Oversimplified, ahistorical	Over-descriptive, lacked general theory