



Leo Frobenius and the Revolt against the West

Author(s): Suzanne Marchand

Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Apr., 1997), pp. 153-170

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/261238>

Accessed: 13-06-2019 12:30 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Sage Publications, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Contemporary History*

Suzanne Marchand

Leo Frobenius and the Revolt against the West

‘Wrath’, that is, the wrath of Achilles, is invoked in the first line of Homer’s *Iliad*, and the following tale, though farcical by comparison to the tale of Achilles’ adventures, should similarly open by emphasizing wrath, rage and *ressentiment*. Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), German ethnologist, was, of course, no Homeric hero, though he was, by his own testimony, ‘brought up to be a wanderer’,¹ and spent his whole life in motion, between Germany and Africa, between the natural and the cultural sciences, between lunacy and scholarship. In addition to spinning out dozens of speculative ur-histories involving moon-goddesses, mystical numbers and the lost continent of Atlantis, Frobenius was a prodigious collector of data and artifacts and one of the first Europeans to try to reconstruct the history of pre-Islamic Africa. After the Great War, his paeans to unspoiled, ur-African blackness and his bitter attacks on Eurocentric historiography and western ‘materialism’ appealed powerfully to many of his contemporaries; his works caught the attention of, among others, Ezra Pound, Johan Huizinga, the exiled German Kaiser, and an important group of African students in Paris, who adapted Frobenius’s neo-romantic fascination with *Negerheit* to their own anti-colonial purposes. A man of epic passions and dissatisfactions, Frobenius was instrumental both in launching a vitalist critique of the west and in crafting the methodological weapons that helped to destroy Eurocentric historiography.

A devoted ethnographer and disgruntled patriot, Frobenius trained one eye on primitive vitality and the other on civilized apocalypse. He loved West Africa with an unprecedented ardour, but could muster only disdain for his discipline, his colleagues, his country, and even his hemisphere. He was certainly not alone in his generation in performing remarkable feats of treasure-trawling or conjuring primitivist reveries, in loving Africa and hating Europe, but his combination of traits otherwise exhibited by Heinrich Schliemann, Emil Nolde, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Gauguin is assuredly

I should like to thank the Leo Frobenius Institut, Frankfurt am Main, and especially Beatrix Heintze, for allowing me access to the archival material cited in this essay. I should also like to thank Anthony Grafton, George L. Mosse, and Robert Tignor for their comments on earlier drafts.

¹ Frobenius, *Erlebte Erdteile*, vol. 1, *Ausfahrt von der Völkerkunde zum Kulturproblem* (Frankfurt 1925), 47.

unique. Frobenius shared with his contemporary expressionists a longing for regeneration and redemption, and with ethnologists and travellers of his era a fascination with what he called ‘the childhood of mankind’. A product of the delirium of the imperialist age and interdisciplinary struggles for scientific legitimacy, the protean and prolific Frobenius epitomizes the para-academic underworld so crucial to the articulation and dissemination of Germanic hypernationalism.² But his example should complicate our picture, for in Frobenius, ‘cultural despair’ was cut with an acute appreciation of the west’s blindspots and crimes against ‘the rest’. Fraught with ironies and agonies, the tale of Frobenius’s revolt against the west should offer us some insight into the complexities of *fin de siècle* German culture.

If Frobenius was important in formulating a critique of Eurocentrism, he did not, of course, lack for sources of inspiration. Paradoxically, a significant portion of the ideas that fed the first critiques of western historiography were born in that foundational colonial discipline, ethnology (or cultural anthropology).³ Ethnology in later nineteenth-century Germany was largely dominated by medical doctors on the one hand, and geographers on the other; and despite the establishment of a few university positions and the building of a national ethnographic museum in 1886, neither group felt their field sufficiently appreciated by the German élite. Mid-century geographers, ethnographers and prehistorians primarily employed methods borrowed from the natural sciences, but after about 1870, these disciplines began to aspire to the status of historical sciences as well. This movement away from description and classification toward historical reconstruction quite rapidly took practitioners into intellectual terrain unfamiliar to their fellow humanists — into worlds where texts were few, and ‘histories’ had to be built on material evidence, ethnological inference and, often, speculation.

By the 1880s, work in this field was already beginning to produce striking critiques of the conventional historiography of the sub-Hegelian type. Denouncing historians for defining ‘universal’ history such that it included only essential moments in the spirit’s development, in 1882 the ‘anthropogeographer’ Friedrich Ratzel lamented: ‘Not only the cold and hot zones are excluded from the sphere of philosophical-historical study . . . but also Africa, which “can prove no movement or development” and America, which is artificially excluded from this dynamic, modern *Geist*.’⁴ Ratzel did not, however, confine his criticisms to the idealist tradition; in 1904 he even dared to attack the revered Leopold von Ranke. ‘If we were to map the areas whose history Ranke has described’, he wrote in the prestigious *Historische Zeitschrift*, ‘we

2 For examples of the importance of this cadre, see Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley 1961); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York 1964).

3 For an example from British anthropology, see George W. Stocking, Jr, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888–1951* (Madison 1995), 34–46.

4 Friedrich Ratzel, *Anthropo-Geographie* (Leipzig 1882), 31–2. ‘It would be a great task’, he added, ‘to demonstrate the influence of the “people without history” on history in general, as Sallust and Tacitus already sketched in their chapters on Africa!’

would see that only a small section of the world has been represented as historically important.⁵ It is possible to see in this geographer's discontent a clear anticipation of the challenges to humanist, academic history that would be raised, as travel, conquest and specialization pressed the next generation of scholars into increasingly more exotic studies.

Ratzel died in 1905, and the generational divide between this scholar and his contemporaries Adolf Bastian and Rudolf Virchow on the one hand, and Frobenius and his cohort on the other, is particularly important for both the political and the institutional dimensions of this story. Politically, many of the first generation of ethnologists were liberals, opponents of Bismarck, and reluctant supporters of German imperialism. Increasingly, however, they, and especially their students, found patriotic rhetoric and the prospect of new territories to explore difficult to resist. And if the first generation, like Ratzel, perpetually lamented their outsider status with respect to the humanities, these men did hold positions of power and influence. Their students, however, like Frobenius, came of age in an era characterized by an over-production of specialized scholars and a widening gap between students and faculty. For these young men, some combination of patriotic fervour and personal ambition made the prospect of collaborating with the colonial project especially appealing; we cannot overlook their nationalist hubris, of course, but we should not underestimate the part of their enthusiasm that was rooted in this generation's particularly violent longing for novelty — both in experience and thought. Novelty was bound up with academic success and with national distinction, and for a generation for whom there were few academic jobs and no wars to fight, discovering a new species, unearthing a lost civilization, or surveying a 'blank' spot on the map satisfied the longing to perform a heroic act as well as the need to demonstrate superlative occupational proficiency. For the academic aspirant of the *fin de siècle*, discovery was both a personal and a professional imperative.

The great problem for these eager students was, however, that in spite of the violent rhetoric issuing from nationalist pressure groups, funding for travellers and collectors remained rather low and erratic throughout the Wilhelmine era; the founding of the Reich Colonial Office and the Colonial Institute in Hamburg in 1907–8 promised a brighter future, but the war intervened before much new work could be started. The brief intersection here of personal and disciplinary interests with patriotic flag-waving made this period between about 1907 and 1914 exciting for aspiring ethnologists like Frobenius; its sudden end, it hardly needs to be added, came as a severe blow to their career prospects, self-image and patriotic pride.

Colonialism, then, helped to create new interest in and new sorts of practitioners of the study of primitive cultures. But Germany's peculiar colonial history may also have given some travellers and writers the opportunity to see

5 Friedrich Ratzel, 'Geschichte, Völkerkunde und historische Perspektive' in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 93, no. 1 (1904), 44.

the world in a way their 'western' counterparts did not. I want to suggest that the Germans learned something important, if only obliquely, from their jealous observation of the other imperial powers and their late and very violent encounter with their colonial subjects. The targets of the Maji Maji and Herero revolts and the keen observers of British, Belgian and French imperial blunders, the Germans were the first to underscore the fragility of European rule. Well before 1917, there were numerous German 'declines of the west' in preparation, if not published, by authors as diverse as Hermann Hesse, Hermann Graf Keyserling, Albert Schweitzer and Leo Frobenius. Of course, imperialism alone did not shape these critiques; German adventures abroad took place within a cultural world simultaneously being shaped by other forces, including struggles between the humanities and the natural sciences, between religious leaders and scientific popularizers, between an older, liberal-positivist generation and the rebellious and resentful younger proponents of *life*. But perhaps by examining more closely the ways in which imperial disappointments shaped German intellectuals' attacks on 'the west', we will learn something about both the violence of this sentiment and its appeal to an eclectic group of pan-Africanists, anti-establishment historians and pessimistic poets.

Reflecting on his formative childhood visits to the Eskimos, Africans and 'inner-Asians' at the Berlin Zoological Garden, Leo Frobenius offered the following explanation of the origins of his passion for Africa and ethnology: 'The maternal kindness of an elderly Nubian woman essentially gave the child the vital content of his calling.'⁶ Of course, such retrospective prophecies of calling, like Schliemann's apparently invented childhood dreams of Troy, are suspect, but in Frobenius's case, the tale has some plausibility. Certainly, the Zoo's inhabitants and its superintendent, who happened to be Frobenius's grandfather, helped to stoke the young man's exoticizing imagination. He immersed himself in accounts of German explorations in Africa, and, perhaps awed by his grandfather's scholar-explorer friends, he developed a profound admiration for university professors who alone, he believed, knew the answers to all the questions he wanted to ask.⁷ In 1892, when he was 19, he published an ethnological study of the southern Congo, having read all the available travelogues but none of the pioneering anthropological theory of his contemporaries, and having, of course, never set foot on the African continent. Frobenius had clearly found his calling, but his parents, like those of many would-be scholars of his day, balked at his choice of profession, and compelled him to suffer a brief apprenticeship in the business world after completing his *Gymnasium* courses.

Frobenius's passion for Africa did not, however, wane during his apprenticeship as his parents had hoped, and on a visit to Bremen's Ethnographic Museum (Überseemuseum), he was seized by what he described as 'the

6 Frobenius, *Erlebte Erdteile*, 1, 48.

7 *Ibid.*, 48–9.

unrestrained hunger for personal experience'.⁸ Lacking the private wealth, civil service post or missionary calling others used to indulge their exotic pre-occupations, Frobenius satisfied his 'hunger' by consuming books and journals. At about this time he also met Ratzel's student, Heinrich Schurtz, who apparently inspired him to study ethnography at university level. As no regular courses in the subject were offered, Frobenius began attending Ferdinand von Richthofen's geography seminar — from whence also came the intrepid Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin — at the University of Berlin in 1893. While in Berlin, he managed to secure an apprenticeship at the Ethnography Museum under director Adolf Bastian, the Catholic evolutionist, and began collecting the ethnographic photos and drawings that would later comprise his 'Afrika-Archiv'. The young scholar was nothing if not assiduous in assembling his materials: by 1925, when Frobenius sold it to the city of Frankfurt, this archive contained 13,140 small and 3,158 large drawings as well as 750 photographs.⁹

Following the German custom of changing universities after a year or two of study, Frobenius moved around the academic world, ending up in 1896 in Basel, where he sought to take his degree. But, in what was surely a life-altering act, the Basel philosophical faculty rejected his two-part thesis, destroying in one blow his admiration for the professoriate and his hope of a university position.¹⁰ Frobenius was furious; his naive reverence for the academy was crushed.¹¹ But he persevered in his ethnological studies. The field, in these years, was in any case very much centred around museum collections; 'fieldwork' remained the exception rather than the rule. In 1898, Frobenius secured an assistantship at the Bremen Museum, now under the direction of his friend Schurtz. A year or two later, he obtained a post at the prestigious ethnography museum in Leipzig, where he encountered Ratzel himself, now in his last and most illiberal years.¹² These positions permitted the young ethnologist to develop an expert eye for stylistic details, but did not, of course, bring him much pay or prestige. This extensive period of collecting and labelling artifacts contributed centrally to Frobenius's conviction that material culture could form the basis for an alternative historical method; at the same time, his lowly professional status and longing for personal experience fed his antipathy for the academic establishment, his jealousy of English imperial power, and his professional insecurities.¹³

8 Quoted in Janheinz Jahn, *Leo Frobenius: The Demonic Child*, trans. Reinhard Sander (Austin 1974), 6.

9 *Vertrag zwischen der Stadtgemeinde Frankfurt . . . und Leo Frobenius*, 16 May 1925, in LFI, Korrespondenz, Institut #2.

10 Anon, 'Leo Frobenius', *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 20 August 1938; in LFI, Kriegsakten 1914 und Verschiedenes.

11 Frobenius, *Erlebte Erdteile*, 1, 60.

12 Helmut Straube, 'Leo Frobenius (1873–1938)' in Wolfgang Marschall (ed.), *Klassiker der Kulturanthropologie von Montaigne bis Margaret Mead* (Munich 1990), 153–4.

13 For his antipathy toward the English, see Frobenius, *Die Zukunft Englands: Eine Kulturpolitische Studie* (Minden 1900); on his alienation from academia, see Jahn, *Leo Frobenius*, 7.

Frobenius's early work is indicative of the ambiguous scientific status of ethnology in his day; if trained largely in the natural sciences, the young museum assistant clearly wished to apply his skills to the rewriting of human history. In a pair of important essays published in the premier geographical journal, *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen* in 1897–8, he adapted his extensive knowledge of artifacts to the 'diffusionist' theoretical orientation of Ratzel and Schurtz. The diffusionists conceived cultural development as the product of exchange, imitation or conquest, rather than that of independent evolution. Similarly, Frobenius, from the outset, was convinced that most of humankind's important innovations had originated in one area and then spread to surrounding regions, where particularistic modifications occurred. But he also retained some of the evolutionist Bastian's ideas in insisting that around these borrowed and modified customs, myths and artifacts, autonomous cultural wholes were formed. These cultural wholes, for Frobenius, were organisms — *the* organisms — and human beings were simply carriers or objects of them; culture was a third sphere, inextricably linked with both nature and *Geist*. Most importantly, culture was to be located in the ways in which humans exploited their material resources; and geography, therefore, was critical, both in determining which materials might be available for use, and in creating possibilities for cross-cultural borrowing. To transform these claims about diffusion and its limits into a means of reading man's prehistory, Frobenius pioneered the study of *Kulturkreisen*, or cultural circles, which were, essentially, areas which shared a cluster of stylistically-defined and historically-related cultural features.¹⁴

Space does not permit a full discussion of the history of culture-circle theory, which, according to one recent commentator, 'shaped ethnological work in central Europe during the whole first half of this century, and which can be described as the most significant methodological contribution of German-speaking anthropology [*Völkerkunde*] to the history of ethnology'.¹⁵ It is, however, significant that the origins of the theory lay in the hyper-diffusionist work of Ratzel, and especially in his study of the history of bow types, which hypothesized a prehistorical link between Oceania and West Africa.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that Frobenius received little credit for his theoretical contributions to his discipline until the late 1920s, partly because of what Ratzel described as his 'pretentious' style and his 'carelessness and inexactitude and lack of clarity in presenting the big picture'.¹⁷ But if inexact, Frobenius certainly did not lack the ambition to lay out a breath-taking 'big

14 See, e.g., Leo Frobenius, 'Der westafrikanische Kulturkreis', *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen*, 44 (1898), 193–204; 265–71.

15 Straube, 'Leo Frobenius', 167.

16 Herman Lommel, 'Mythologie im Bildern', *Leo Frobenius: Ein Lebenswerk aus der Zeit der Kulturwende* (Leipzig 1933), 77–8; see also Dewitt Clinton Durham, *Leo Frobenius and the Reorientation of German Ethnology, 1890–1930* (PhD dissertation, Stanford University 1985), 26–31.

17 Ratzel to Frobenius, 15 December 1898, quoted in 'Abdrücke aus der Kritik' in *Leo Frobenius: Ein Lebenswerk*, 153.

picture' of prehistorical cultural diffusion. Like a pendulum, he argued in a subsequent essay, cultural development had first swung from west (Europe and West Africa) to east (Asia Minor); after a hiatus, during the Bronze Age, the pendulum had swung westward, across Europe to Spain and Portugal, and from thence to the New World.¹⁸ In this 1899 article, then, Frobenius already demonstrated what would prove to be a life-long proclivity to mix highly insightful ethnological analyses with wildly conjectural global histories.

Frobenius also infused his first publications with an unusual degree of passion, particularly in his prefatory laments about the sad state of his discipline and warnings against the destructive effects of the homogenizing tendencies of the modern world. Very early in his work one finds a powerful admiration for authenticity coupled with an expressionist love of innocence and a deep antipathy to the corruptions of indirect colonialism; 'the Negro in a frock coat' is the metaphor he regularly invoked to denigrate the superficial adoption of foreign traits induced by French, Belgian and especially English, rule.¹⁹ This combination of elements makes for rhetoric that often sounds very much like anti-imperialist diatribe. In 1898, on the heels of a British expedition's rapacious excavation of numerous bronze sculptures in Benin, a furious Frobenius wrote:

With our iron fist we smash other peoples. We sow our colonies on the corpses of putrefying races and cultures, and burn down the dwelling-places of other types of development in order to erect our palaces on the smoking ruins. . . . The burning of the library at Alexandria robbed human history of important materials in the space of a few hours. The European ocean of fire, which extends across the Earth, may have destroyed within a few decades the largest part of living and dead 'world history'. With the destruction of each people's peculiarity, a document disappears forever. And only he who . . . in terrible pain has struggled in vain to discover the reason for such a loss, who with a shudder recognizes too late the value of possessions now destroyed for eternity, only he can have an inkling of the terrible and rightful scorn of our descendants, who will not be able to forget that we knew so ill how to cherish and preserve these precious documents.²⁰

Frobenius certainly did care about the fate of the Africans, and probably at this point in his career sympathized with left-liberal critiques of imperialist overstretch. But he also cared passionately about the Africans, at least in part, because he thought them to be living documents of an otherwise unrecoverable universal human past. The passage just quoted, therefore, is not yet a frontal assault on western civilization's universalisms, but rather the ranting of an angry young museum assistant, bitter over the rejection of his thesis, and resentful that others are destroying the source materials for his path-breaking

18 This argument is laid out in Frobenius's *Die naturwissenschaftliche Kulturlehre* (Berlin 1899).

19 E.g., Frobenius, *The Childhood of Man*, trans. A.H. Keane (London 1909), 22–4; idem, *Vom Kulturreich des Festlandes: Dokumente zur Kulturphysiognomie* (Berlin 1923), 18.

20 Frobenius, *Der Ursprung der afrikanischen Kulturen* (Berlin 1898), viii. For another example of this attitude, see idem, *Paideuma: Umriss einer Kultur- und Seelenlehre* (Munich 1921), 14.

research.²¹ In this preservationist attack on the destruction of ‘documents’, however, there are already the seeds of a later, more global, critique.

In 1904 Frobenius abandoned museum work and theorizing for a time, in order, at last, to visit Africa. He would never again feel fully ‘at home’ in Europe. Most of the funding for his first trip came from the ethnographic museum in Hamburg, which, as Frobenius later explained, required that while travelling he ‘amass as many things as possible for as little money as possible’; the Reich bureaucracy had refused to fund the trip ostensibly because Frobenius had a weak heart, but more probably because he seemed a loose cannon.²² After spending two years in the Belgian Congo, he returned to Germany in 1906 with a collection of 8,000 artifacts and a burning desire to return for more study. In the book describing his trip and results, he denounced abuses of colonial power and insisted that greater understanding of African customs was crucial if the Germans were to avoid fresh disasters like the Herero wars.²³ In 1907, he embarked on another two-year sojourn, this time to Gambia, French West Africa and Togo; following a short trip to Algeria, between 1910 and 1912, he travelled extensively in Nigeria and the Cameroons. It was on this fourth trip that he discovered the highly-developed culture of the Yoruba, which he believed to be descended from the lost civilization of Atlantis. This grand discovery intensified his anxieties about the imminent passing away of authentic African culture and whetted his desire to perform grand-scale collecting projects.²⁴ The older generation of Africans, he argued, was dying out, and the younger generation, caught up in the colonial economy, lacked appreciation and knowledge of traditional myths, tribal histories and rich burial grounds.²⁵

Before the first world war, as after, Frobenius’s greatest difficulty was obtaining funding. The expeditions he planned were elaborate and expensive and his unorthodox methods and outsider status in academic circles made it hard for him to tap the usual sources of scientific patronage.²⁶ But Frobenius was nothing if not determined and ingenious. As we have seen, collecting artifacts was one means of acquiring museum funding; during his pre-war travels, he acquired so many (a total of some 26,000) for the Hamburg collec-

21 See J.M. Ita, ‘Frobenius in West African History’ in *Journal of African History*, 13, 4 (1972), 682.

22 Frobenius quoted in Jahn, *Leo Frobenius*, 7; Frobenius, *Im Schatten des Kongostaates* (Berlin 1907), 10.

23 Frobenius, *Im Schatten*, 221–4.

24 In 1913 he petitioned the Kaiser for permission to operate a lottery which he hoped would raise the needed 500,000 marks for a four-year trip and four simultaneous archaeological digs. Frobenius to Kaiser, 16 January 1913, in PZStA, RMdesI 16305.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Frobenius’s ethnographic methods included the recruiting of individuals from each culture he visited to accompany him to his subsequent stops; in this way he hoped that his subjects would perform their own ethnographic self-analysis, learning to see their own cultures with new eyes after having experienced the otherness of their neighbours. See Frobenius, *Erlebte Erdteile*, vol. 3: *Vom Schreibtisch zum Äquator: Planmäßige Durchwanderung Afrikas* (Frankfurt 1925), 27–9.

tion that the museum could not afford to buy them all at the agreed price of ten marks an item.²⁷ He solicited the aid of businessmen and aristocrats, and attempted to set up a lottery.²⁸ In 1913, the ethnologist obtained 25,000 marks from the privy purse by importuning Kaiser Wilhelm II, who in fact found Frobenius's stranger theories deeply compelling.²⁹ Still, on the eve of the Great War, Frobenius had amassed personal debts of approximately 140,000 marks;³⁰ he had lost, rather than gained, his fortune in the service of Germany and science.

In his works before the war, Frobenius combined a conventional reportage of observations with a growing affection for non-Islamic Africans and a speculative ur-history of astonishing ambition. In his *Die Ursprung der afrikanischen Kulturen* of 1898, Frobenius had already praised the creativity and simplicity of unspoiled West African culture, as against northern and eastern African cultures, which he believed to have been tainted by the west. This preference for 'Ethiopians' (the term for black Africans used by the late Enlightenment physical anthropologist Blumenthal, and more importantly, by Herodotus) over lighter-skinned 'Hamites' was very likely a response to attempts by British anthropologists — and German historians — to establish the contrary;³¹ but it was also the result of Frobenius's lifelong search for uncorrupted — and perhaps just as important, unstudied — ur-ancestors.³²

Over time, Frobenius grew increasingly resentful of the public's failure to appreciate this Edenic race; and in his popular multi-volume account of his findings, entitled *Und Afrika sprach*, he turned his venom on western historiography, which saw African history only 'through Islamic glasses', that is, only through the testimony of written sources. To this corrupt historiography, Frobenius juxtaposed a history based on myths and material culture, a sort of ethnohistory, which would throw off old prejudices and lay the basis for a 'real' history of the ancient world. By 1912, he had established a master narrative, which described the co-dominance of an ur-historical West African Atlantis and its trading partners in the Mediterranean, the Etruscans, and emphasized the persistence of these 'Geschwister' down to the time of the Phoenicians. His proof depended on a few quotations from Herodotus, a geo-

27 Felicitas Bergner, 'Ethnographisches Sammeln in Afrika während der deutschen Kolonialzeit', *Paideuma*, 42 (1996), 227; *Afrika-EthnoGraphisch: Eine Bilderausstellung des Frobenius-Instituts* (Frankfurt 1996), 23–4.

28 Frobenius to Kaiser, 16 January 1913, in PZStA, RMdesI 16305.

29 Jahn, *Leo Frobenius*, 8.

30 Johann Albrecht, Herzog zu Mecklenberg, to Kaiser, 17 July 1913, in PZStA, RMdesI 16305.

31 On the British conception of Hamites, see St Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles 1987), 128–9. This time-honoured prejudice was not only ethnic but also religious; generations of Europeans had considered Muslims (usually lighter-skinned) more civilized than 'pagans'. See Aissatou Bouba "Lauter Breite Negergesichter": Die Darstellung der äußeren Erscheinung einiger nicht-moslemischer Ethnien aus Deutsch-Nordkamerun in der Vorkolonial- und Kolonialzeit', *Paideuma*, 42 (1996), 63–83.

32 See, for example, Frobenius, 'Kulturgeographische Betrachtungen Nordwest-Afrikas' [1909], reprinted in *Erlebte Erdteile*, 3, 285–313.

grapher called Hanno, some Etruscan clay masks, glass beads, a little Max Müller, and on Schliemann's example, which was never very far from the eccentric ethnologist's mind.³³

The motto for Frobenius's 1912 account of his discovery of the lost Yoruba Atlantis read: 'Africa must be drawn more into the field of vision of certifiable [*beglaubigt*] history and cultural history', and Frobenius certainly did mean to raise the status of African history in the eyes of his academic peers. But his pre-war work was also shaped by more practical, and political, motives, many of which would not have pleased his postwar admirers. He decried, in a 1907 essay, the cruel and inefficient rubber extraction practices of the Belgian Kassai-Company, which were destroying Africa's social fabric. He often also berated his fellow Europeans for their derogatory statements about African behaviour, insisting, in a Rousseauist vein, that Africans, far from being less moral than white folk, were actually more so; they simply exhibited none of the artificial manners of repressed Europeans.³⁴ But Frobenius did not denounce imperialism itself, and, in the years before his discovery of the Yoruba, endorsed white superiority without demur; he simply believed that the Belgians and the English had failed to cultivate the colonies' most profitable resource: the native labour force.³⁵

It is important to recognize that Frobenius believed the preservation of African culture and paternalistic benevolence on the part of Europeans to be not just a general good, but a crucial means of instilling the work ethic and preventing unrest. Fear of provoking a revolt, and the desire to prescribe the means of avoiding one, is, in fact, at the heart of his work in the period 1904–14. In 1907, after visiting an American Baptist mission which tried to integrate African customs into its services, Frobenius wrote, disapprovingly:

I want to underscore, explicitly, that I see the Negro as a primitive form of mankind, and it is demonstrable, based on the history of all colonizing nations and on the lives of almost every individual, that, if the Negro is deprived of the sentiments of his primitive kind and if he falls prey to the obscurity of equalization in matters of cultural production, he puts not only the cultural work of the white race, but also himself in great danger. I have repeatedly returned to this idea, and I believe, that I have conducted my studies in an objective manner.³⁶

Similarly, in his 1912 account of his travels in what is now Nigeria, he offered a long polemical discussion on the evils of indirect colonialism and the cultural mixing of blacks and whites that occurred in cities like Lagos and Ibadan; British tolerance, he argued, in a section entitled 'The serious side of

33 Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach*, vol. 1, *Auf den Trümmern des klassischen Atlantis* (Berlin 1912), 364–74. (Friedrich) Max Müller was a comparative philologist whose work was widely popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Müller believed that most myths were based on worship of the sun and that their idiosyncracies and variations were largely the result of degenerative changes in languages.

34 Frobenius, *Schwarze Seelen: Afrikanisches Tag- und Nachtleben* (Berlin 1913), 10.

35 See, for example, *Im Schatten*, 39; Frobenius, 'Kolonialwissenschaftliches' [1907], reprinted in *Erlebte Erdteile*, 3, 193–253.

36 *Ibid.*, 233.

pants-wearing Negrodom [*Hosennegertums*]', would end in tears; at best it would bring on only economic cataclysm; at worst, we would see 'the whole ruling class swamped and negrified'.³⁷ It would be better to capitalize on indigenous African industries like wood- and metal-working than to introduce European forms of production and consumer goods into this alien world.³⁸ Having travelled through some of Africa's hottest spots, and seen grotesque examples of European arrogance and cruelty, Frobenius simply concluded that shouldering the white man's burden would be a trickier proposition — and require more ethnological expertise — than his contemporaries had foreseen.

Frobenius's horror of English-style *Hosennegertum* was not at all irrelevant to the sort of African history he wrote. In fact, as he explained in *Und Afrika sprach*, he found the process of 'negrification' very interesting,

... for this may have been typical of African conditions in earlier times. In this book, which is devoted to [uncovering] the traces of older cultures, we will often speak about the problem of colony-formation. . . . Here we will also be interested in the question, how did older colonial cultures, which were once established here, collapse, or disappear? He is a bad ethnologist who doesn't understand how to formulate laws out of the phenomena of the present.³⁹

Thus, Frobenius's picture of the Yoruba Atlantis — traces of which remained in the 'degenerate' black cultures of his day — was based on a pessimistic, but not oppositional, theory of colonization which emphasized the eternal return of imported, high culture and its equally inevitable conquest by the colossal, fateful power of African sloth. Why did the Portugese fail in their efforts? 'Because', Frobenius explained,

... the capacity of that [African] race to bear [white culture] was overestimated, because [the Portugese] forgot to differentiate between what could be externally absorbed and what could take root within, because the race question was not recognized. The race-power and the race-will of the whites was absorbed by black phlegm; the race-energy of the whites was dissolved in negrification.⁴⁰

If he lauded the glories of the long-lost black Atlantic culture, Frobenius clearly retained a wholly 'orientalized' view of his contemporary Africans.

During the war, Frobenius managed to get a seventh trip funded by the Prussian General Staff. His official task in the winter of 1914/15 — persuading the Abyssinians to join the Central Powers — failed, but this trip provoked a profound reorientation in Frobenius's thought.⁴¹ The quiet of the desert in the

37 Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach*, 1, 39.

38 Frobenius, 'Kolonialwirtschaftliches', 248–53.

39 Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach*, 1, 40.

40 *Ibid.*, 41.

41 Frobenius's official manoeuvres can be reconstructed from Embassy Abyssinia to Foreign Ministry 28 December 1914 and other documents in PA/AA 305/2 (Geheime Akten betreffend den Krieg 1914), copies of which are held by LFI, binder marked: Kriegsakten 1914 und Verschiedenes.

face of Europe's explosion, he wrote to his father, marked a sudden reversal of poles. The war had destroyed the somnambulism and superficiality of European materialism; Europe was returning to nature at last, and replacing Africa as the continent of movement.⁴² The war's unhappy end, however, turned Frobenius's optimistic apocalypticism to ashes and revealed to him the essential, cultural differences that underlay the European landmass. 'The renowned internationalism [*Weltkultur*] of the period before 1914', he reflected, 'was a masquerade. The world war served the purposes of a demasking. Only the future will show what the physiognomy of cultures really is.'⁴³ In 1920, he collaborated with his friend Oswald Spengler in the founding of the *Forschungsinstitut für Kulturmorphologie* in Munich, devoted to establishing a *real* physiognomy of cultures. Although the two mavericks soon parted ways, Frobenius continued his quest to identify cultural differences as products of the soul, not of acquired refinements or skills. Unquestionably, it was the war that led Frobenius to suggest the spiritual unity of Germans and 'Ethiopians', a gesture that the African poet and politician Léopold Senghor found very moving.⁴⁴ In the war's aftermath, it was very important for Frobenius to show that similarities between Europeans were only skin-deep.

Interestingly, Frobenius's quest to discover the real physiognomy of cultures parallels in time attempts by the great French and British anthropologists like Marcel Mauss and A.R. Radcliffe-Browne to get past the accumulation of ethnographic factoids, and to understand culture as a psychological complex of interrelated elements. Frobenius's project, however, was formed in postwar and, importantly, *post-colonial* Weimar, and by a man without the liberal proclivities or institutional power of a Mauss or Radcliffe-Browne; moreover, Frobenius had not lost the conventional pre-war conviction that culture was shaped by geography and climate, and in fact the war seemed to deepen the determinist elements of his thought. His diffusionist ethnology still bore the shape of Ratzelian scientific geography, but the content of his hypothetical histories increasingly marked him as the heir of such eccentrics as J.J. Bachofen and the so-called 'Pan-Babylonists', a school of philologists who traced the origin of all religions to the astrological worldview of the Babylonians.⁴⁵ Frobenius now emphasized intuition as the only means by which one could properly understand self-sufficient, Spenglerian cultural organisms;⁴⁶ and larded his speculative histories with denunciations of western materialism and Eurocentric historiography.

In the 1920s, Frobenius made his goal the grasping of the essence or soul

42 Frobenius, 'Die Umkehr' [1915] in *Erlebte Erdteile*, 3, 453–65.

43 Frobenius, *Vom Kulturreich des Festlandes*, 18–19.

44 Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'The Revolution of 1889 and Leo Frobenius', trans. Richard Bjornson, in *Africa and the West: The Legacies of Empire*, eds Isaac James Mowoe and Richard Bjornson (New York 1986), 86–7.

45 He had already demonstrated his affinities with this group in his 1904 *Das Zeitalter des Sonnengottes* (Berlin 1904).

46 Frobenius, *Paideuma*, 7.

of culture, which he dubbed *paideuma*. In a 1921 volume that caught the imagination of Ezra Pound, Frobenius described the two basic *paideumae* operating on the planet: that defined by the cave mentality, and that defined by the wide open spaces mentality (*Höhlengefühl* and *Weitengefühl*). The former belonged to the Hamitic, and also Semitic people of the Orient; the latter to the Ethiopian and Germanic peoples. These *paideumae* were constitutive of cultures, but overlying this level was a world-historical trajectory with four stages: the mythological, the religious, the philosophical and the material. The mythological still dominated Oceania and South Africa, the religious East Asia and India. The philosophical stage continued in Central Europe, but in Western Europe and in New England, the material stage had triumphed. Though initially seduced by materialism, Germany actually belonged in the world of high religions and philosophy, or on the side of the soulful Orient as opposed to the greedy Occident.⁴⁷

But in addition to these *paideumatic* and historio-geographical dimensions, for Frobenius, cultural history also had a temporal aspect. Cultural forms passed through a series of organic stages, from childhood, to adulthood, to old age; or from the daemonic, to the idealistic, to the factual. Predictably, the Africans remained in the ‘daemonic’ childlike stage, while the Europeans were placed in the adult sphere. But in Frobenius’s view — which provided the major inspiration for the play-theory of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga⁴⁸ — the nineteenth-century values usually attached to these categories are reversed. In childhood, intuition and creativity are at their height, while in adulthood, only utilitarian and scientifically proven thoughts can be considered valuable — egoism reigned and the vitality of culture ebbed. Present-day Europe, Frobenius argued, was arrogant, senile and obsessed with facts.⁴⁹ But a sincere longing for Africa, and for childhood, had begun to seize his countrymen; the appeal of African innocence was now apparent, he argued, ‘in our longing for the far-away, in our coveting of the naive and untouched, in our flight from the stink of sweat and machines produced by the degeneration of our will to achieve into the tedium of routinized work’.⁵⁰ Cut off from Africa, his ambitions and ideals destroyed by the war, an ageing Frobenius turned his romantic reflections on the loss of innocence into a direct critique of European ‘civilization’.

This loss of innocence was also, for Frobenius, connected to a nefarious sort of hubris; senile Europe had forgotten its pan-historical insignificance. As he argued in 1924 in a book with the improbable title, *The Head as Fate*, it was time Europeans learned some lessons from the unspoiled Africans. These

47 Frobenius, *Vom Kulturreich des Festlandes*, 146; also idem, *Schicksalskunde* (Weimar 1938), 72.

48 See Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London 1949), 15–27.

49 Frobenius, *Paideuma*, 56.

50 Frobenius, *Das unbekannte Afrika: Aufhellung der Schicksale eines Erdteiles* (Munich 1923), 3.

people, Frobenius showed, recognized their subservience to the fate imposed by their cultural forms and did not attempt to escape their destinies. Germans, too, he suggested, should abandon false universals and learn to love their culturally-determined fate; in 1931, he cautioned: 'The man who lives in the twentieth century, but chooses a role from the fourteenth, or who is German but wants to play the Indian, fritters away his life.'⁵¹

The onset of the troubled 1920s brought Frobenius some new recognition, if little positive change in his finances — he was only able to return to Africa in 1926, 11 years after his last voyage. Ironically, in this decade he at last acquired an adjunct teaching post (in 1925, he obtained permission to teach at the newly-founded University of Frankfurt; in 1932 he acquired an honorary professorship), but also began to profit from his hostility toward the academic establishment. In an era of increasingly bitter assaults on bookishness and useless (especially humanistic) learning, Frobenius's intuitive approach and exotic expertise won him new admirers,

Frobenius's reversal of fortunes began soon after the collapse of the Wilhelmine Empire. In 1921, his friend and drinking partner Eugen Diedrichs, the leading publisher of *völkisch* works, put out the first in a series of 12 volumes of African stories collected by Frobenius before the war; the last volume of the lavishly produced 'Atlantis-Ausgabe' appeared in 1928. Now employing his charisma to charm German, rather than African, audiences, the ethnologist became a popular public speaker.⁵² He developed an intimate relationship with the former Kaiser Wilhelm II, who corresponded excitedly with the ethnologist about pagan goddesses and Chinese symbols, Sumerian religion and Germany's fate. Confined to the European continent, he returned to his attempts to convert diffusionist ethnography into global prehistory, lamenting that after a quarter-century of promoting African art and culture, only now, when all possibility of further study seemed foreclosed, had his field become fashionable. 'At that time', he wrote, referring to the later 1890s,

... philology and the natural sciences reigned. Culture in general, and especially the culture of such a 'wild' continent as Africa, was anything but popular. Today, on the streets, in salons, and even in the lecture halls, nothing, it seems, is so much discussed as culture. Today, Buddhas, African figurines and Oceanic masks are highly valued, in intellectual as well as monetary terms.⁵³

Once obsessed with documents and seduced by the superficial charms of Asia, Germans were finally beginning to appreciate the depth and profundity of the African past.

By the time Frobenius turned 60 in 1933, his star was clearly rising. Many of his nemeses had retired or died, and he was receiving new plaudits for his work. But he had fought so many titanic battles with the status quo, his

51 Frobenius, *Schicksalskunde*, 193.

52 Hans Rhotert, 'Der Werdegang', *Frobenius: Ein Lebenswerk*, 21.

53 Frobenius, *Das unbekannte Afrika*, xii.

student Hans Rhotert claimed in a birthday testimonial, ‘that today, when his ideas have essentially triumphed, he may often think, “Too bad, it’s all already over”, and his colleagues often have trouble preventing him from fighting where there is no longer a battlefield.’⁵⁴ Opportunist that he was, he did fight to maintain his institute under nazi rule, and he did save it, although he did not retract his claim that culture was more essential than race.⁵⁵ He continued his work on ancient Africa, focusing now on the study of rock paintings, and planned another trip for 1936, which failed to come off. But the following letter of late 1935 (to ex-Kaiser Wilhelm) demonstrates the extent to which his passions had cooled:

It is true that I am now living in gloomy times. The horizon is again heavily clouded and as has so often been the case, my hours of wakefulness in the night are consumed by searching for an answer to the question, to be or not to be, to stay or to go, to bend or to break. . . . In earlier years I could drink a bottle of red wine and bury the anxieties until the next day [when] a fresh, joyful waking showed them to be spectres that could not compete with the real powers of a man. These days are no more. That means, the black clouds on the horizon remain the same, but the joyful spirit that had so long confronted them unbroken, begins more and more to lose its powers.⁵⁶

Prevented from recommencing his odyssey by ill health, poor finances, and political limitations, Frobenius began to lose his epic energy. Fittingly, his notoriously weak heart stopped pumping, not while he was tramping through an African desert but while on holiday at an Italian resort. Rest, not frantic movement, polished off the eccentric vitalist.

One could say that in Frobenius’s cultural fatalism the stoicism of the later Spengler meets the anti-westernism of the *völkisch* movement; such a cursory conclusion would describe the nature and consequences of his postwar work in familiar anti-modernist, proto-nazi terms. But clearly Frobenius’s audiences read him in other ways, and, in fact, the main impact of his cultural history was not in the nazi world, but elsewhere. To illustrate this point, I want to conclude with a short investigation of two central and influential aspects of Frobenius’s work with salience beyond the German institutional and political context: his defence of ethnology as a historical science and of Africa as an important part of world history.

As we have seen, Frobenius, following Friedrich Ratzel, believed it was the task of ethnology to provide the basis of a ‘real universal history’, as opposed to the narrow, Rankean sort of Mediterranean-centred tale; Heinrich Schliemann, whom Frobenius once described as the ‘conqueror of “the world beyond history”’, had shown the way to a new sort of historical understand-

⁵⁴ Rhotert, ‘Der Werdegang’, 13.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Frobenius to (General) Carlus v. Malairé, 28 February 1933, in LFI, Korrespondenz, Institut #1; Stellvertreter des Führers (Adjutant) to Frobenius 6 March 1934, in LFI, Vorlesungen; Dr Gross (Kulturpolitisches Archiv des NSDAP) to Herr Ruder (Gauleitung Frankfurt), 22 June 1938, in LFI, Kriegsakten 1914 und Verschiedenes.

⁵⁶ Frobenius to Kaiser Wilhelm, 12 December 1935, in LFI, Frobenius to Kaiser Wilhelm.

ing.⁵⁷ But, eager to give ethnographic evidence the same historical validity as was then accorded to archaeological remains, Frobenius went beyond Schliemann and Ratzel, and sketched out a sort of ethno-historical approach to universal cultural history. One of the great collectors of novel forms of historical evidence, including myths, songs, photos, drawings and all manner of artifacts and works of art, Frobenius pioneered the writing of pre-Islamic African history, inspiring others such as Eric Wolf, author of the seminal study, *Europe and the People Without a History* (1982) to create innovative forms of historical reconstruction.⁵⁸ He recognized very early that archaeology and ethnology had opened the way for the articulation of a much deeper — and less élitist — universal history, and that it was not just evidentiary difficulties but also Eurocentric presumptions and conventions that stood in the way of historiographical reconceptualization.⁵⁹ His methods were unconventional and sometimes unscrupulous;⁶⁰ his ideas were shaped by his own ideological predispositions and delusions of grandeur. Nonetheless, ethnohistory undoubtedly owes Frobenius many a theoretical as well as a material debt.

Appropriately, however, our idiosyncratic ethnologist had perhaps his greatest import outside his profession proper. As early as 1932, a short selection of Frobenius's work had appeared in the Parisian avant-garde journal, *La Revue du Monde Noir*, accompanied by some words of praise for his 'disinterestedness and the remarkable knowledge that he has put in the service of the history of African civilizations, which make him worthy of the admiration and recognition of all those interested in the dark continent'.⁶¹ Particularly after the appearance of the translation of his *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* in 1936, Frobenius became extremely popular among early African nationalists; his praise of black African purity — *Negerheit*, or in its more familiar French form, *négritude* — appealed especially to Léopold Senghor, the Paris-educated future president of Senegal. In 1973, Senghor remembered Frobenius's profound effect — 'like a thunderclap' — on his circle in Paris in the 1930s:

We knew by heart Chapter II of the first book of [*Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*], entitled 'What Does Africa Mean to Us?', a chapter adorned with lapidary phrases such as this: 'The idea of the "barbarous Negro" is a European invention, which in turn dominated Europe until the beginning of this century.'⁶²

57 Frobenius, *Schicksalskunde*, 45. Schliemann, Frobenius claimed, had created 'eine Bresche in die Skepsis historisierender Tatsachen-Kritik'.

58 See Wolf's comment in *Europe and the Peoples without History* (Berkeley 1982), 411.

59 For example, see Frobenius, *Indische Reise: Ein unphilosophisches Reisetagebuch aus Südindien und Ceylon* (Berlin 1931), 221–2.

60 Frobenius's system for extracting prize artifacts from the Africans included flattery, bribery, deceit, and cultivation of the hard-up. His own description of his acquisitions in Yorubaland, and the controversies that followed, is well worth a read. Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach*, 1, 49–67.

61 P. Desroches-Larouche, 'Le spiritisme dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique', *La Revue du Monde Noir*, 2, 5 (March 1932) (reprint; Nendeln, Liechtenstein 1971), 20.

62 Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'The Lessons of Leo Frobenius' in *Leo Frobenius: An Anthology*, ed. Eike Haberland, trans. Patricia Crampton (Wiesbaden 1973), vii.

Frobenius, he wrote, ‘more than any other, more even than Bergson, reinstated intuitive reason in our eyes and restored its position as pre-eminent’.⁶³ In addition, Senghor claimed, Frobenius gave them a new appreciation of the unity of African culture.⁶⁴ Celebrating the inspiration Frobenius’s studies of ancient African civilization had given the Pan-African movement, W.E.B. DuBois called the German ethnologist ‘the greatest student of Africa’.⁶⁵ Of course, there are plenty of African and Afro-American sources of *négritude*; Senghor himself gives credit to Claude MacKay, Aimé Césaire and the surrealists as well as to Frobenius and other Africanist scholars.⁶⁶ But Frobenius provided the inspiration for a particular sort of critique of European hegemony, which resonated powerfully both in Europe and abroad. His neo-romantic search for an unspoiled black Atlantis provided the anti-colonial movement, longing for liberation from western tyranny and Eurocentric history, with the energizing form — and distorted contents — of myth on an epic scale.

It has been said that if not for *négritude*, Frobenius would be wholly forgotten. Few ethnographers now cite him; most cultural theorists have never heard his name, much less read his work. I hope I have offered some reasons above for members of these groups — especially those interested in the histories of their disciplines — not to overlook Frobenius. For those interested in the history of Afrocentrism, the career of this peculiar German should help to clarify the institutional and intellectual origins of some part of this anti-establishment theory. In this essay, however, I have emphasized the light Frobenius’s career casts on the cultural world of German imperialism. We have seen how the wrath of Frobenius, directed both at the ‘west’ and at the German academic establishment, expressed itself in the form of post-colonial, expressionist ethnology. This wrath, I have argued, was shaped by the intersection of a generational revolt in the cultural sphere and the onset of hyper-imperialism, and was exacerbated by the frustrated ambitions and bleak lessons of the first world war. In the postwar era, critiques of imperial misrule were turned into attacks on a demonized, cosmopolitan west; by the same token, the critique of text-based humanism was turned into an assault on note-shuffling specialists and a song of praise for intuitive, vitalist historiography. Frobenius, of course, was only one of the players strutting and fretting on this stage, but perhaps by understanding his curious conglomerate of longings, obsessions and fears, we will have gained some better comprehension of the para-academic German underworld that came of age around 1890, and of its simultaneously liberating and destructive wrath.

63 Ibid., viii.

64 Ibid., x, xii.

65 W.E.B. DuBois, *The World and Africa* (New York 1947), 79n.

66 Jacques Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor* (New York 1971), 19, 45–7, 53, 60–70.

Archival Sources

LFI: Leo Frobenius Institut, Frankfurt Binders: Doorn, Kaiser Wilhelm an Frobenius; Kriegsakten 1914 und Verschiedenes; Korrespondenz — Institut #1; Vorlesungen; xeroxes from PA/AA (Bonn, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes)
PZStA: Potsdam, Zentrales Staatsarchiv
RMdesI: Reichsministerium des Innern

Suzanne Marchand

is Assistant Professor of European Intellectual History at Princeton University. She is the author of *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and German Philhellenism, 1750–1970* (Princeton 1996) and is currently working on the cultural history of colonialism in Germany.