

VISIONS OF CULTURE



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An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists

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Jerry D. Moore



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Franz Boas: Culture in Context



Franz Boas (1858–1942) shaped the direction of twentieth-century American anthropology. His former student Alfred Kroeber wrote only months after Boas's death that "the world lost its greatest anthropologist and America one of its most colorful intellectual figures" (1943:5). Echoing this assessment thirty years later, George Stocking Jr. wrote, "There is no real question that [Boas] was the most important single force in shaping American anthropology in the first half of the 20th century" (1974:1). Boas's influence was institutional, intellectual, and personal. Like Tylor and Durkheim, Boas played a pivotal role in moving anthropology into academia, in establishing associations and journals, and by creating essential networks of institutional support from the public, policymakers, and other scientists.

Boas defined the principal fields of inquiry that American anthropologists would pursue. His wide interests—spanning from biological anthropology to linguistics—gave American anthropology a topical breadth that is not really present in Great Britain or France, where anthropology is preeminently social anthropology and archaeology and biological anthropology are separate fields. The fact that American anthropology has included sociocultural anthropology, linguistics, physical anthropology, and archaeology—the so-called four-fields approach—is partly a reflection of Boas's broad interests.

Boas created an anthropology very different from that of Morgan, Tylor, or Durkheim. Rather than assuming that cultural practices were explicable only in reference to broad evolutionary

stages, Boas argued that they were understandable only in specific cultural contexts.

For example, Boas and the anthropologist O. T. Mason engaged in a spirited debate about the organization of ethnographic materials in museum displays: It is an unlikely subject for a fierce debate, but it produced an illuminating exchange. Mason, an evolutionist, proposed organizing ethnographic displays in the Smithsonian Institution by artifact classes—pottery, stone tools, musical instruments—regardless of their place of origin, displaying what Mason called “similarities in the products of industry.” Mason wanted to illustrate the evolutionary parallels in human nature, arguing that cultural products stemmed from similar, universal causes.

Boas’s response was quick and telling. Boas contended that cultural traits first must be explained in terms of specific cultural contexts rather than by broad reference to general evolutionary trends. “In the collections of the national museum,” Boas wrote, “the marked character of the North-West American tribes is almost lost, because the objects are scattered in different parts of the building and are exhibited among those from other tribes” (1887:485). Instead of being presented in technological “stages,” ethnographic collections should be “arranged according to tribes, in order to teach the peculiar style of each group. The art and characteristic style of a people can be understood only by studying its productions as a whole.”

Over the next decade, Boas expanded this critique into a larger-scale attack on the theories of Morgan, Tylor, and other evolutionists. Boas’s basic approach (culture was to be understood from detailed studies of specific cultures) was passed on to the first cohort of professional American anthropologists, individuals who would literally shape the field of anthropological inquiry: Alfred Kroeber (chapter 5), Ruth Benedict (chapter 6), Edward Sapir (chapter 7), Margaret Mead (chapter 8), and many others. In turn, Boas’s students, as anthropologist Marvin Harris writes, “set forth the main lines of development of anthropological research and instruction at crucial institutions around the country” (1968:251). Thus, Boas’s personal contacts with his students extended his intellectual influence and shaped the institutions of American anthropology.

Yet, as Kroeber noted, “it has long been notoriously difficult to convey the essence of Boas’ contribution in anthropology to non-anthropologists” (1943:24), a task at which Kroeber also failed. This difficulty and the fact that Boas played a pivotal role in the establishment of American anthropology make even a brief explanation of Boas’s contribution of essential value.

Background

The founder of American anthropology was born in northwestern Germany into a prosperous Jewish family that was committed to progressive education and politics. He wrote that he was raised “in a German home in which the ideals of the Revolution of 1848 were a living force,” referring to the European revolutions that fought for universal suffrage, freedoms of press and assembly, and other liberal democratic reforms—revolts ultimately repressed by the military and monarchy. Of his parents’ Judaism, Boas wrote, “My father had retained an emotional affection for the ceremonial of his parental home, without allowing it to influence his intellectual freedom,” and concluded, “My parents had broken through the shackles of dogma” (1939:19). By his own account, these influences shaped his anthropology and his social activism.

Boas was educated in his hometown and then went off to study physics, mathematics, and geography in a string of universities. “My university studies were a compromise,” Boas recalled, between an “emotional interest in the phenomena of the world,” which led to geography, and an “intellectual interest” in the formal analyses of mathematics and physics (1939:20). His doctoral dissertation was on the color of water, a topic emphasizing physics over geography; he received his doctorate in 1881 at the age of twenty-three. Kroeber contended that Boas’s education “as a physicist heavily determined his whole intellectual career,” creating his “gifts for dealing with abstract form or structure and of intellectual precision and rigor” (1943:7).

After a year of military service, Boas was at loose ends; he wanted to study human societies but lacked financial support. After a string of setbacks, Boas joined a German expedition to

the Arctic in June 1883 to pursue research on the Inuit in order "to discover how far one can get, by studying a very special and not simple case, in determining the relationship between the life of a people and environment" (Boas 1974:44). Supported by writing freelance articles for a Berlin newspaper, Boas spent a year on Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic. Traveling by dogsled during the Arctic winter in minus-50-degree temperatures, Boas charted the Baffin Island coastline, collected Inuit legends, and observed rites and ceremonies. Ultimately, Boas was unsatisfied with his ethnographic research, calling it "shallow" and a "disappointment"; nevertheless, he recognized that the year in the Arctic "had a profound influence upon the development of my views . . . because it led me away from my former interests and toward the desire to understand what determines the behavior of human beings" (1939:20-21).

Boas returned from the Arctic to uncertain prospects, unsuccessfully applying for jobs and fellowships in the United States, then working in Germany for eighteen months before returning to America. In the fall of 1886, he worked for the Canadian Geological Survey in southern British Columbia, conducting a brief ethnographic survey in the vicinity of Vancouver Island (Rohner and Rohner 1969). Returning to New York in 1887, Boas accepted a job as assistant editor of *Science* and, with some financial security, married and became an American citizen.

From his position at *Science*, Boas extended his influence almost immediately. In 1888, the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) asked Boas to collect ethnographic data on the Northwest Coast. After a successful trip, the BAAS supported a second field trip to the Northwest Coast in 1889 in which Boas studied native languages, made anthropometric measurements, and investigated social organizations of the Kwakiutl and Tsimshian (Boas 1974). In 1889, Boas obtained a teaching position at the newly founded Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where the first American Ph.D. in anthropology was granted under his leadership in 1892 (Kroeber 1943:12). In 1892, financial turmoil at Clark University led to a massive faculty resignation. Boas also left to join the anthropological staff at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago who were working on displaying Native American materials. A

short-term position at the newly established Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago was followed by part-time work for the Smithsonian, another field trip to the Northwest Coast sponsored by the BAAS, and unfulfilled hopes of a position at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. This professional turmoil was deepened by the death of his child (Hyatt 1990:33).

It was a dark and difficult time. Boas's letters from the field oscillate from quick descriptions of research accomplished to depressed accounts of financial insecurities, underscored by a deep longing for his wife and surviving children.

But in 1895, things began to change. John Wesley Powell offered Boas an editorial position at the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, which galvanized the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) into making a counterproposal that Boas accepted. Appointed to the AMNH in December 1895, Boas finally obtained a permanent position. "No longer concerned with economic survival," Hyatt writes, "he began to concentrate on the science of anthropology and its many applications" (1990:35).

From his base in New York, Boas began to influence American anthropology. In May 1896, he was hired as lecturer in physical anthropology at Columbia College and was appointed professor in 1899. He maintained his position at the AMNH throughout this period and became curator of anthropology in 1901, weaving close ties between the AMNH and Columbia. Boas seized his opportunity with extraordinary energy and expertise. Harris, a prolific scholar in his own right (see chapter 15), wrote,

Boas' accomplishments as a teacher, administrator, researcher, founder and president of societies, editor, lecturer, and traveler are exhausting to behold. To anyone who has ever worried about publishing or perishing, the fact that all this activity was accompanied by the publication of a torrent of books and articles is well nigh terrifying. (1968:252)

From 1895 until his death in 1942, Boas's résumé becomes a blur of publications and accomplishments, almost as if he wanted to compensate for the frustrations of his early career.

Boas became full professor at Columbia University in 1899 and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1900. He helped establish the American Anthropological Association and revived the journal *American Anthropologist*. Boas founded the *International Journal of American Linguistics* in 1917, which continues to be published; helped establish an archaeological field school in Mexico; and presided over a series of field research projects, particularly in the Northwest Coast, while continuing to publish constantly.

Boas wrote six books and more than 700 articles; his bibliography records his diverse research (Andrews 1943). Most numerous are his articles and reports on his investigations in the Arctic and Northwest Coast; Boas's publications on the Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, and other Northwest Coast societies total over 10,000 printed pages (Codere 1959). He made major contributions in the study of language. For four decades, he taught two seminars at Columbia University: one on statistical methods and the other on North American Indian languages. He published extensively on Northwest Coast Indian languages and established a research agenda for recording Native American languages (Boas 1966d).

Boas's work in anthropometry was a major field of endeavor with significant implications for public policy. In Boas's time, race was considered a fixed biological category; individual races were thought to have specific properties—physical, mental, and cultural. Many formal studies defined racial variation based on cranial measurements rather than “obvious” characteristics, such as skin color. Skull form, it was thought, was a more stable property and thus a better basis for defining racial categories, yet the stability of cranial form had been assumed, never demonstrated. In 1911, Boas published the results of a massive study of the head form of 17,821 immigrants and conducted sophisticated statistical analyses of the data (remember, this was done without computers). Boas showed that cranial form was anything but stable, with significant differences between immigrant parents and their American-born children (Boas 1966b; Gravlee et al. 2003). Boas demonstrated that traits thought to be fixed (genetically inherited traits) were actually modified by environment. And if such a stable racial trait as cranial form was influenced by environment, then all other racial classifications and characterizations became suspect.

In 1931, Boas gave his presidential address, titled “Race and Progress,” to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). He summarized four decades of research, applying it to America's most cancerous social problem: racism. Throughout his career, Boas attacked racist pseudoscientific studies linking race and intelligence (Baker 1998:120–26). Arguing that variations among individuals were greater than those between races, Boas concluded that “biological differences between races are small. There is no reason to believe that one race is by nature so much more intelligent, endowed with great willpower, or emotionally more stable than another” (1931:6). Not only was Boas offended by bad science, but he drew on his personal experience of anti-Semitism; these factors produced an informed and fervent rejection of racism. Boas was involved in the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and wrote about race in popular magazines as well as in scientific journals (Hyatt 1990:83–99).

Boas's 1931 speech was a central statement about a long battle against racism. Boas argued that because of intermarriage and mating, there were no biologically “pure” races and that, contrary to a then common view, the “mixture” of races had no harmful consequences. Further, variations between individuals within races were greater than differences between races. Boas questioned the significance of IQ tests and discounted studies showing racial variations in intelligence. In addition to attacking the biological concept of race, he attacked the social concept. “Among us race antagonism is a fact” (Boas 1931:6). He then argued that America's great problem is a social stratification based on racial characteristics that lead to divisive conflicts. Boas concluded his AAAS address with this essential challenge:

As long as we insist on [socioeconomic] stratification in racial layers, we shall pay the penalty in the form of interracial struggle. Will it be better for us to continue as we have been doing, or shall we try to recognize the conditions that lead to the fundamental antagonisms that trouble us? (1931:8)

Boas continued to speak out against racism, and by 1933 he was an early critic of Nazism. Boas attacked their racist policies, argued that Hitler and his leading supporters should be confined

to an insane asylum, and wrote anti-Nazi polemics that the Allied underground smuggled into Germany (Herskovits 1943:45–46). Boas was a committed public intellectual. (For more detailed discussions of Boas's diverse accomplishments in academic and public life, see Cole 1999; Herskovits 1953; Hyatt 1990; Spier 1959; and Stocking 1974.)

The Integration of Cultures

Like any developing scholar, Boas's opinions evolved over the course of his career, but his most consistently held position was that cultures were integrated wholes produced by specific historical processes rather than reflections of universal evolutionary stages. In his earliest works, Boas wrote passages that could have been penned by Edward Tylor: "The frequent occurrence of similar phenomena in cultural areas that have no historical contact . . . shows that the human mind develops everywhere according to the same laws" (1966a:637). By the late 1890s, however, Boas had developed his critique of evolutionary frameworks and the comparative method. Boas argued that the comparative approaches of Morgan and Tylor were undercut by three flaws: 1) the assumption of unilineal evolution, 2) the notion of modern societies as evolutionary survivals, and 3) the classification of societies based on weak data and inappropriate criteria. These flaws were the targets of the Boasian attack.

Boas dismissed the evolutionary frameworks of Morgan, Tylor, and others as untested and untestable. In his article "The Methods of Ethnology," Boas summarizes the evolutionary position, which presupposes that the course of historical changes in the cultural life of mankind follows definite laws which are applicable everywhere, and which bring it about that cultural development, in its main lines, is the same among all races and all peoples. *As soon as we admit that the hypothesis of a uniform evolution has to be proved before it can be accepted the whole structure loses its foundation.* (1920:311–12; emphasis added)

Boas undercut the entire basis of nineteenth-century cultural evolution. We might agree with Tylor and Morgan that certain

technological processes have an inherent evolutionary order—fire must precede pottery making, flintlocks were invented before automatic rifles—but there is no ethnographic evidence indicating that matrilineal kin systems preceded patrilineal kin systems or that religions based on animism developed before polytheistic religions. Boas argued that this unilineal ordering is a simple assumption; there is no proven historical relationship or any way to prove such a relationship. Therefore, evolutionary frameworks were unproven assumptions imposed on the data, not theories derived from ethnographic data.

Further, Boas argued, the unilineal classification of different societies assumed that different societies with similar cultural patterns (for example, they used Hawaiian kinship classifications [see p. 23] or the bow and arrow) were at similar evolutionary levels. On the contrary, he believed that very similar cultural practices may arise from different causes. Anthropology's primary task, according to Boas, was to provide "a penetrating analysis of a unique culture describing its form, the dynamic reactions of the individual to the culture and of the culture to the individual" (1966c:310–11). Boas did not assume (as some of his students did) that general laws of human behavior did not exist; rather, he assumed that those laws could be derived only from an understanding of specific historical processes:

We agree that certain laws exist which govern the growth of human culture, and it is our endeavor to discover these laws. The object of our investigation is to find the processes by which certain stages of culture have developed. The customs and beliefs themselves are not the ultimate objects of research. We desire to learn the reasons why such customs and beliefs exist—in other words, we wish to discover the history of their development.

A detailed study of customs in their bearings to the total culture of the tribe practicing them, and in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighboring tribes, affords us almost always a means of determining with considerable accuracy the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question and to the psychological processes that were at work in their development. The results of inquiries may be three-fold. They may reveal the environmental conditions which have created or modified elements; they may clear up psychological factors which are at

work in shaping culture; or they may bring before our eyes the effects that historical connections have had upon the growth of the culture. (1896:905)

Thus, Boas suggests that lawlike generalizations can be based on adaptational, psychological, or historical factors, but only if documented by well-established ethnographic cases:

The comparative method and the historical method, if I may use these terms, have been struggling for supremacy for a long time, but we may hope that each will soon find its appropriate place and function. The historical method has reached a sounder basis by abandoning the misleading principle of assuming connection wherever similarities of culture are found. The comparative method, notwithstanding all that has been said and written in its praise, has been remarkably barren of definite results, and I believe it will not become fruitful until we renounce the vain endeavor to construct a uniform systematic history of the evolution of culture, and until we begin to make our comparisons on the broader and sounder basis which I venture to outline. Up to this time we have too much reveled in more or less ingenious vagaries. The solid work is still all before us. (1896:908)

Conclusion

Boas argued that detailed studies of particular societies had to consider the entire range of cultural behavior, and thus the concepts of anthropological holism and cultural particularism became twin tenets of American anthropology. In later years, Boas grew even more skeptical about the possibility of deriving cultural laws. Boas concludes,

Cultural phenomena are of such complexity that it seems to me doubtful whether valid cultural laws can be found. The causal conditions of cultural happenings lie always in the interaction between individual and society, and no classificatory study of societies will solve this problem. The morphological classification of societies may call to our attention some problems. It will not solve them. In every case it is reducible to the same source, the interaction between the individual and society. (1932:612)

Unfortunately, Boas did not articulate the relationship between cultural elements and cultural wholes. Stocking poses the unresolved paradox:

On the one hand, culture was simply an accidental accretion of individual elements. On the other, culture—despite Boas' renunciation of organic growth—was at the same time an integrated spiritual totality that somehow conditioned the form of its elements. (1974:5–6)

Boas demolished the evolutionary framework, provided methodologies for the investigation of specific cultures, and hunted at the relationship between individuals and society—cultural elements and cultural wholes—but never really explained the process of cultural integration.

Because of Boas's enormous influence on the practice of anthropology in America, anthropological research took a decidedly antitheoretical turn in the early twentieth century, when research began to focus on the differences rather than the similarities between societies. When cultural elements were held in common, they were interpreted as evidence of historical contact and diffusion and not unilineal evolution. The antievolutionary position would dominate American anthropology until the 1940s, when an evolutionary approach would be reformulated in the work of Leslie White (chapter 13) and Julian Steward (chapter 14). Until his death in 1942, Boas continued his remarkably detailed, stunningly diverse studies of humanity, and his influence was felt for decades later as many of his students turned their attention to what Boas saw as the key nexus, namely, the relationship between the individual and society.

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