

Franz Boas: A short Biographical Sketch

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Abstract: In the early 20th century American Anthropology established by one of the famous anthropologist i.e. Franz Boas. He is the founding father of American anthropology and has undoubtedly been the greatest single influence on the development of American anthropology and also he played a key role in organizing the American Anthropological Association and made contributions of the four field approaches in American Anthropology. Therefore, Boas one of the founders of academic anthropology and is also credited with the theory of Historical Particularism. He conducted significant research on human growth, anthropometry, mythology and folklore, linguistic, primitive art, to name only the most important topics. The department at Columbia, strongly identified with Boas himself, soon became the heart of anthropology in the United States.

Keywords: Founding father, American Anthropological Association, Four Field Approaches, Historical Particularism.

INTRODUCTION

Famous as the '*the anthropological concepts of culture and cultural relativism*', Franz Boas was an important figure in 20th century anthropology [5]. Boas established himself in American anthropology at a time when the discipline was moving out of museums and into the academy.

He played a key role in organizing the American Anthropological Association and made contributions in the field of physical anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, as well as cultural anthropology. He argued against the theories that distinguished people on the basis of race and discredited the belief that western civilization is superior to the other societies. So, Franz Boas is widely regarded as the founding father of American anthropology and has undoubtedly been the greatest single influence on the development of American anthropology in the twentieth century. Historians working in the Humboldt tradition developed ideas that would become central in Boasian anthropology. Leopold von Ranke defined the task of the historian as "merely to show as it actually was", which is a cornerstone of Boas' empiricism. Franz Boas also considered one of the founders of academic anthropology and is also credited with the theory of Historical Particularism [1]. Until Boas presented Historical Particularism, many anthropologists believed that societies develop according to one universal order of cultural evolution. This belief, called the Unilineal Evolution, explained cultural similarities and differences among societies by classifying them into three sequential stages of development: savagery, barbarism and civilization. Boas criticized this belief as based on insufficient evidence. For example, Unilineal Evolution claims that matrilineal kin systems preceded patrilineal kin systems and that religions based on animism developed before polytheistic religions. He

also criticized Unilineal Evolution for its method of gathering and organizing data. At that time many anthropologists relied on missionaries or traders for data collection and anthropologists themselves rarely went to the societies that they were analyzing. Boas argued that those armchair anthropologists organized that second-hand data in unsystematic manners to fit their preconceived ideas. Boas' scholarship was shaped by 19th century German historicism and materialism, romanticism and liberalism; the trust of his anthropological critique led towards 20th century cultural relativism [5]. The turn of the century revolution in social thought can be regarded within limits and in very rough terms as the infusion of certain elements of idealist thought into the mainstream of Positivism. The view of man and society which appeared at about the beginning of the twentieth century is sometimes referred to as anti-intellectualism.

Boas was an innovative and productive researcher, contributing to statistical physical anthropology, linguistics and American Indian ethnology. Boas was a strong-willed man and he frequently found him-self chafing under the authority of those above him. But the force of his personality and his determination were to inestimable importance in the history of American Anthropology. Boas was absolutely dedicated to establishing anthropology as a fully professional, rigorous and research oriented discipline and almost single-handedly he trained and

directed crops of students- such as Kroeber, Lowie, Radin, Spier, Benedict- who would distinguish the field as a viable and productive addition to the social science. He conducted significant research on human growth, anthropometry, mythology and folklore, linguistic, primitive art, to name only the most important topics. The department at Columbia, strongly identified with Boas himself, soon became the heart of anthropology in the United States.

Short Biographical Sketch

Franz Boas was born in Minden, in the Westphalia area of Germany, in 1858. His father's name was M. Boas and mother's name was Sophie Meyer. From the age of 5, he was interested in the natural sciences, including botany, zoology and geology. His full name is "Franz Uri Boas" While studying at the Gymnasium in Minden, his interest in the history of culture took root. After attending the universities of Heidelberg, Bonn and Kiel, in 1881 he earned a Ph.D. in physics, with a minor in geography from the University of Kiel. Boas continued his studies in Berlin. Soon after, in 1883, he began a yearlong scientific expedition his first—to Baffin Island in northern Canada. "He was an 'ethnic' German, preserving and promoting German culture and values in America [2] ". In an autobiographical sketch, Boas wrote:

"The background of my early thinking was a German home in which the ideals of the revolution of 1848 were a living force. My father, liberal, but not active in public affairs; my mother, idealistic, with a lively interest in public matters; the founder about 1854 of the kindergarten in my home town, devoted to science. My parents had broken through the shackles of dogma. My father had retained an emotional affection for the ceremonial of his parental home, without allowing it to influence his intellectual freedom [1]".

In 1886, on his way back to Germany from one of his many visits with the tribes of British Columbia, Boas stopped in New York City and decided to live there, taking a position as an editor for Science magazine and his first teaching position at the newly founded Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1887 he immigrated to the United States. He married, and he later obtained citizenship. His wife's name was Marie Krackowizer. In 1896, Boas began lecturing at Columbia University, and three years later, he became the first professor of anthropology there. Nine years after that, he established Columbia's department of anthropology, the first in the United States. Also in 1896, Boas was appointed assistant curator of ethnology and somatology at the American Museum of Natural History, a post he would hold until 1905, when he resigned to focus on anthropological education and research [2].

Franz Boas died of a stroke at the Columbia University Faculty Club on December 21, 1942 in the arms of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Franz Boas' contributions-----

- Franz Boas' main contributions to anthropological thought was his rejection of the then popular evolutionary approaches to the study of culture, which saw all societies progressing through a set of hierarchic technological and cultural stages, with Western-European culture at the summit. Boas argued that culture developed historically through the interactions of groups of people and the diffusion of ideas, and that consequently there was no process towards continuously "higher" cultural forms.
- 'Cultural relativism' was introduced as a theory by Franz Boas, an early 20th century. As far as Boas' cultural relativism, and his denial of evolutionism is concerned, it brought to anthropology an understanding that any attempt to understand other human behaviour or forms of social organisation must involve a deep contextual understanding of the surrounding culture. When Boas applied this to anthropology he introduced the principle of "cultural relativism". The idea that each culture was the product of a unique and particular history, and not merely generated by race and environment, was another important contribution by Boas. The methodological foundation of Boas' cultural relativism: "elements of a culture are meaningful in that culture's terms, even if they may be meaningless (or take on a radically different meaning) in another culture".
- Boas was aware that what differentiated the study of humankind from geography or zoology was the study of "culture." But culture to Boas was not simply another synonym for "civilization" (i.e. art, technology, and lofty ideas). And unlike many of his predecessors he did *not* see culture as predestined to some kind of linear progression, onward and upward, until it resulted in the equivalent of civilized European society. Boas demonstrated that what appeared to be evidence of cultural evolution was really the consequence of unscientific methods, and a reflection of Westerners' beliefs about their own cultural superiority.
- Anthropology, viewed as the study of similarities and differences between groups of people, required detailed investigations of the historical origins and context of each similarity and difference. Boas' plan was to understand the historical development of each region of the world. After that, there would be plenty of time to draw up worldwide evolutionary generalizations. It was this plan that

was later called *'historical particularism'*. Historical particularism is an approach to understanding the nature of culture and cultural changes of particular people. It is not a particular methodology. Boas argued that the history of a particular culture lay in the study of the individual traits of a particular culture in a limited geographical region.

- Boas has been credited as the first scientist to publish that the White and the Negro were fundamentally equal, just as were all people. He actively lent his support to African American organizations. As an anthropologist he sought to use science, including his studies of tribal peoples, to seek out and document the truth about the significance of race. It was, in addition, his hope that people could learn to be tolerant of difference, and to see so-called primitives not as inferior or less developed, but as a source of diversity that had new ideas to offer.
- Boas encouraged the "four field" concept of anthropology; he personally contributed to physical anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, as well as cultural anthropology[4]. His work in these fields was pioneering: in physical anthropology he led scholars away from static taxonomical classifications of race, to an emphasis on human biology and evolution; in linguistics he broke through the limitations of classic philology and established some of the central problems in modern linguistics and cognitive anthropology; in cultural anthropology he (along with Polish-English anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski) established the contextualist approach to culture, cultural relativism, and the participant-observation method of fieldwork.
- Boas also contributed greatly to the foundation of linguistics as a science in the United States. Boas research in Baffin Island and in the Pacific Northwest, he argued that "alternating sounds" is not at all a feature of Native American languages—indeed, he argued, they do not really exist. Rather than take alternating sounds as objective proof of different stages in cultural evolution [6]. Boas initially broke with evolutionary theory over the issue of kinship. Lewis Henry Morgan had argued that all human societies move from an initial form of matrilineal organization to patrilineal organization.
- Historians and social theorists in the 18th and 19th centuries had speculated as to the causes of this differentiation, but Boas dismissed these theories, especially the dominant theories of social evolution and cultural evolution as speculative. He endeavored to establish a discipline that would base its claims on rigorous empirical study.
- Boas soon began to formulate theories on anthropological relativism, which he described thusly: "Civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes [3]".
- Franz Boas viewed culture as a set of customs, social institutions and beliefs that characterize any particular society. He argued that cultural differences were not due to race, but rather to differing environmental conditions and other 'accidents of history' Goodenough [7]. Boas also understood that as people migrate from one place to another and as the cultural context changes over time, the elements of a culture, and their meanings, will change, which led him to emphasize the importance of local histories for an analysis of cultures.
- Boas organized a grand expedition to the Bering Straits area to test the hypothesis that there were cultural similarities between the peoples of Siberia and the peoples of the New World. Boas tested serious hypotheses about diffusion and independent invention, about race, and about the peopling of the Americas. These three lines of research cannot easily be put down as "historical particularism" or "antiquarianism." Intent upon the task of 'salvage ethnography', anthropologists sometimes missed the important changes that were taking place in front of their eyes. Diffusion and independent invention are 'happening' processes, not just something that went on in the "good old days."
- A close reading of Boas' 1894 essay on "*Human Faculty as Determined by Race*" and those portions of "*The Mind of Primitive Man*" deriving from it reveals several interesting changes in the use of the terms "culture" and "civilization". The idea of culture, radically transformed in meaning, is a central element of this paradigm, and indeed much of the social science of the 20th century may be seen as a working out in detail of the implications of the culture idea.
- Boas to promote a cultural anthropology characterized by a strong commitment to -----
- Empiricism (with a resulting skepticism of attempts to formulate "scientific laws" of culture)
- A notion of culture as fluid and dynamic
- Ethnographic fieldwork, in which the anthropologist resides for an extended period among the people being researched, as a method of collecting data, and
- Cultural relativism as a methodological tool while conducting fieldwork, and as heuristic tool while analyzing data.

- Franz Boas was an immensely influential figure throughout the development of folklore as a discipline. He fought for most of his life to keep folklore as a part of anthropology.

Important books and Articles Writings by Boas

- Boas, Franz (1888); *“Central Eskimo”*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Boas, Franz (1905); *“Kwakiutl Text”*. Publication of Jesup North Pacific Expedition.
- Boas, Franz (1911); *“The Mind of Primitive Man”*. (Online version of the 1938 revised edition at the Internet Archive)
- Boas, Franz. (1911); *“Handbook of American Indian languages”* (Vol. 1). Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 40. Washington: Government Print Office (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology).
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- Boas, Franz (1928); *“Anthropology and Modern Life”* New York: W.W. Norton and co.
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Relationship between previous and contemporary scholars

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory was extremely popular in the 1920s; While Boas and his students were profoundly affected by portions of Freud’s work. Boas worked more closely with Bastian, who was noted for his antipathy to environmental determinism. Instead, he argued for the "psychic unity of mankind", a belief that all humans had the same intellectual capacity, and that all cultures were based on the same basic mental principles. Variations in custom and belief, he argued, were the products of historical accidents.

Boas rejected the prevalent theories of social evolution developed by Edward Burnett Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Herbert Spencer not because he rejected the notion of "evolution" per se, but because he rejected orthogenetic notions of evolution in favor of Darwinian evolution. But some socio-biologists and evolutionary psychologists have suggested that Boas was opposed to Darwinian evolution, Boas in fact was a committed proponent of Darwinian evolutionary thought.

Boas initially broke with evolutionary theory over the issue of kinship. Lewis Henry Morgan had argued that all human societies move from an initial form of matrilineal organization to patrilineal organization.

Some scholars, like Boas' student Alfred Kroeber, believed that Boas used his research in physics as a model for his work in anthropology. Many others, however—including Boas' student Alexander Lesser, and later researchers such as Marian W. Smith, Herbert S. Lewis, and Matti Bunzl—have pointed out that Boas explicitly rejected physics in favor of history as a model for his anthropological research.

CONCLUSION

In summary to Boas, culture is to be understood in terms of its own sui generis principles and not in terms of the natural properties of the human mind. The two principles which stand out in Boas’ work are the processes of diffusion and modification. Both of these are subject to a great deal of historical contingency, and the result is that any cultural system is somewhat arbitrary in relation to the conditions and exigencies of the moment. There is a third principle behind culture which Boas sometimes noted but which he virtually ignored the rather broad limitations of the environment. It is primarily by virtue of the environment that the institutions of mankind are rooted in the present. At the level of the individual himself, Boas gave little scope to the human will; it is culture which makes behavior intelligible, because, for the most part, human actions conform to traditional patterns.

Many of Boas' conclusions, as well as those of his most noted students, have fallen out of favor as more anthropological work has been carried out. However, Boas and his students are responsible for taking anthropology away from grand theories of evolution and diffusion and refocusing its attention on the many different cultures and varieties of cultural expression. Also, the interplay of countless factors that influence culture and culture change received more attention as a result of Boas and his students. The emphasis on the importance of the current fieldwork methods have changed since Boas set forth his ideas on participant observation; those ideas have formed the foundation for fieldwork methods among anthropologists in the U.S.

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