

Boas

During the first third of the 20th century, American anthropology was dominated by the work and ideas of Franz Boas and his students. Trained in Germany as a physicist, Boas developed an interest in the relationship between human perception and the natural world, an interest that led him to geography and finally to ethnology. After geographical and ethnological research in Baffinland and British Columbia, Boas immigrated to America. An outsider to professional ethnography, Boas mounted a devastating critique of the discipline's racialistic and evolutionary assumptions culminating in 1911 with major publications in physical anthropology – which challenged racial classification and its attendant beliefs about intelligence – linguistics and ethnology. 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.

Boas established himself in American anthropology at a time when the discipline was moving out of museums and into the academy. Boas, working in museums, rejected the evolution oriented displays and advocated that material culture be set in its cultural context. Boas trained most of the important anthropologists of the next two generations, many of whom found positions in newly organized anthropology departments in American universities. Hence the dominance of Boasian anthropology in the United States: not only did Boas and his students replace one scientific paradigm (evolutionism) with another (relativism), they were able to control the emergent institutional power base of anthropology. After the 1930's, the Boasian approach was contested by other schools of social-science thought: the functionalism of British Social Anthropology and French sociology, European structuralism and Weberian sociology reinterpreted by

Talcott Parsons. Thus by the second half of the 20th century, most American anthropologists probably did not think of themselves as Boasians. Still, as George Stocking has written, “much of 20th century American anthropology may be viewed as the working out in time of various implications in Boas’s own position.”

Most Boasians – including Boas himself, Alfred Louis Kroeber, Edward Sapir, Robert Lowie, Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Jules Henry – were cultural critics who brought anthropology to bear on the political and social controversies of their time. Boasian anthropology was determined above all to propagate a relativistic and anti-racist “social scientific orientation to human differences.” Boasians repeatedly spoke out against racism and national chauvinism, and in favor of pluralism and intercultural tolerance – in the early 1920s when American xenophobia reached hysteric proportions, during the depression of the 1930s and during World War II. Not content merely wage war on racist social science in various professional arenas, Boasian anthropologists addressed a broader audience in such periodicals as *The New Republic* and *The Nation* and in books aimed simultaneously at scholars, students and the educated public. They wrote about race, culture, nationhood, language, education and world civilization. They also contributed to an emerging modernist discourse on the arts. In sum Boasian anthropology took seriously the duty of the scholar and scientist to make specialized knowledge accessible to citizens of a modern society

Much of Boas’s lifework was an attack on 19th century social evolutionism. Boas argued that the classificatory schemes of evolutionary theory – dividing the world into “savage,” “barbarian,” and “civilized” people – were “artificial”, their pretension to universal scientific validity marred by their grounding in Western values. Only detailed cultural

histories of all the world's peoples, as opposed to the speculative histories of the evolutionist, would allow scholars to sort out local detail from universally true statements about human culture.

An underlying tension in Boasian anthropology opposes scientific rationality to the recognition of a world of differing cultures, hence of differing ways of thought, even differing rationalities. As Boas worked out the implications of his position, he came to the profound awareness of the power of cultures in human affairs. That developing awareness was rooted in part in German romanticism stemming from Herder. As Boas put it in a letter to the New York Times in which he decried anti-German sentiments expressed by Americans during WWI: "In my youth I had been taught in school and at home not only to love the good of my country but also to seek to understand and respect the individualities of other nations." Yet, as Stocking has pointed out, "Boas never abandoned entirely a 19th century liberal belief in a singular human progress in "civilization" that was based ultimately on the cumulation of rational knowledge". Science, then, led to an appreciation of – indeed, a theory about – cultural diversity and alternative cultural logics. At least for Boas, science thereby did not renounce its claim to privileged status among mostly critical modes of human knowledge – even though the scientific study of other cultures made possible a newly critical awareness of the biases inherent in even the scientist's perspective

Basic Premise

Historicism is an approach to the study of anthropology and culture dating back to the mid 19th and early 20th century and encompassing two distinct forms of historicism, diffusion and historical particularism. Historical particularism is an approach most often associated with Franz Boas and his students. While socio-cultural evolution offered an explanation of culture change – what happened and where, it was unable to describe the particular influences on and processes of cultural change and development. To accomplish this end, an historical approach was needed for the study of cultural change and the development not only of what happened and where but also why and how.

Boas is the name most often associated with the historicist approach to anthropology. He did not feel that the grand theories of socio-political evolution or diffusion were provable. To him the notion of there being one single human culture (emphasized by the term Culture with a capital C) that all societies were evolving towards were flawed especially those that had a western model of civilization as that towards which all societies are evolving.

His belief was that many cultures (here for the first time the term cultures with small c meaning a diversity of cultures is used for the first time) developed independently, each based on its own particular set of circumstances such as geography, climate, environment, resources and particular cultural borrowing. Based on this belief, reconstructing the history of individual cultures requires an in depth investigation that

compares groups of cultural traits in specific geographical areas. Then the distribution of these cultural traits is plotted. Once the distribution of many sets of cultural traits is plotted for a general geographic area, patterns of cultural borrowing may be determined. This allows the reconstruction of individual histories of specific cultures by informing the investigator which cultural elements are borrowed and which was developed individually. Cultures then are diverse and unique and comprised of countless individual traits. For Boas, cultures were bundles of traits. Boas argued that each cultural trait has a complex past, and therefore the total cultural assemblage of a people "has its own unique history". He rejected the notion of more or less uniform evolutionary stages since the presence or absence of pottery, metallurgy, or the like in a given area "seems due more to geographical location than to general cultural causes."

Boas successfully brought about the demise of socio-cultural evolutionism primarily first by showing that their data was speculative and un-provable and second showing that returning to points of origin was impossible and third shifting the focus from "C" culture to diverse, unique and integrated cultures.

Refutes Evolutionist

In a paper published in 1887 on "The Study of Geography", Boas distinguished between two fundamentally different scientific pursuits. The first seeks to discover general laws of the universe and it considers a particular phenomenon of interest only for what it reveals about some natural law. The second approach consists of "the study of phenomena for their own sake". This approach seeks to understand phenomena as they appear to the human observer; interest is directed toward a thorough understanding of the phenomena themselves rather than toward the laws

which they express. Boas argued that the two forms of science are compatible and equally valid.

This division of scientific interest is reflected in Boas' early work in anthropology. He was quite explicit that the first form of science occupies an important place in the discipline. He wrote that, "certain laws exist which govern the growth of human culture and it is our endeavor to discover these laws." Boas was critical of the earlier comparative method employed by the evolutionist however, and argued that a fresh approach was needed. The earlier method was to construct classificatory schemes with which to organize the ethnographic data; these schemes were based on the principle that the simpler and more "irrational" customs are earlier. In other words, the evolutionist assumed that their system of classification represented history. Boas rejected this assumption and he argued that the laws of evolution can be derived only from an analysis of actual histories of delimited regions.

It was characteristic of the period in which Boas wrote to regard human institutions as expressions of mental life. Both the positivists and idealists, in spite of their differences agreed on this point. Consequently, it is not surprising that Boas believed that evolutionary law were to be found in the "psychical laws of the human mind" Like Tylor Boas thought that culture could be reduced to individual mental processes.

The second form of science, that which is concerned not with the search for universal laws but with an understanding of phenomena for their own sake, played an even more important role in Boas' early anthropology. He held that the primary means for achieving this kind of understanding is the historical approach: it is possible to attain "an intelligent understanding of culture by discovering how it came to be what it is. In his early work, Boas

returned again and again to the detailed historical accounts of particular regions, especially in his many articles on folklore.

The historical approach – tracing diffusion – was not the only one which he used in order to achieve this form of understanding, however, for he also employed the principle of subjective interpretation. He attended a conference in Berlin where he had the opportunity to interview some Northwest Coast Indians, who had been brought to Berlin, “and opportunity was thus given to cast a brief glance behind the veil that covered the life of those people.” He commented that “the attraction became irascible” and with the financial aid of some friends he set off for research in British Columbia. What attracted him so strongly was not history but the desire to get “behind the veil” that stood between him and the thought of the Indians. Boas’ interest in the subjective side of culture constituted a major theme in his work, and the motivation behind this interest seems to have been the desire for understanding simply for understanding sake.

I have said that Boas saw two ways to pursue the second form of science in anthropology or to arrive at an “intelligent understanding of culture. One was study culture history (by which he meant diffusion) the other was to achieve subjective understanding. It appears that Boas did not regard these as clearly distinguishable approaches for he believed that when people offer an interpretation of their customs they provide an explanation of their historical development as well. By inquiring into a people’s ideas then, the investigator can understand the past and vice versa. His discussion of ceremonial masks is illustrative. In some societies, he writes, masks “are used for deceiving spirits,” whereas in others, “the wearer personifies a deceased whose memory is to be recalled.” These statements express the people’s cultural explanation for the use of masks.

However, Boas thought that these brief characterizations also provided a historical account of the respective customs, for he wrote that “These few data suffice to show that the same ethnical phenomena may develop *from different sources*”. Boas was led to explore the subjective side of culture, the domain of cultural ideas; and in studying cultural ideas he thought he was also studying history. However, Boas soon gave up the notion that the study of ideas is a safe approach to the study of history.

Factors Leading to Boas' Culture Concept

First factor was Boas' desire to work out the detailed history of delimited regions or what Alfred Kroeber was to call culture areas. The principal methodological technique he used for this was the study of the dissemination or diffusion of traits. For example, by an investigation of myths he concluded that, at least with respect to mythology, the Navaho were more strongly influenced from the northwest of North American than the northeast or the Mississippi Area. In brief, myths are products of such complex histories that the search for origins is futile. The speculation of men like Tylor – who held, for example, that “nature myths” originate in the savage's desire to understand the universe – cannot be proven.

An even more fundamental result of Boas' conclusion regarding the complexity of history is that he came to regard culture as an emergent system. It is not to be understood as the product of natural mental operations of individual human beings, but as the result of its own *sui generis*, historical principles. In particular, cultural traits are to be explained in terms of the principles of diffusion and modification, the latter of which is the process whereby a trait is reshaped to fit the new cultural context in which it is found. Boas insistence that culture is “historically determined” amounts to saying that it is emergent

Closely associated with the development of Boas' view that culture is an emergent system is the growth of his cultural determinism. If culture does not arise from within the human being, then it must come to him ready-made from without. (This thus introduces the subject of enculturation which his student Margaret Mead was to develop) Boas' held that human beings learn rather than create their culture: human behavior and beliefs reflect not his native intelligence but the cultural tradition in which they are raised (here Boas introduces the theme of underlying patterns of cultures which gives a configuration to any particular culture – a theme developed by his student Ruth Benedict). Boas' rejection of the racial explanation of mental differences is famous and this rejection "took place mainly because Boas . . . generally elaborated the alternative explanation of mental differences in terms of cultural determinism." Boas' recognition of cultural determinism of the "iron hold of culture upon the average individual", also led him to see how thoroughly people are modified by tradition

A second important factor contributing to the emergence of Boas' culture concept was his fascination for getting behind the veil separating him from foreign modes of thought. Boas conceived of the problem of subjective understanding (here subjective means interpretation) in terms radically different from those envisaged by Tylor – according to whom differences in belief between people turned essentially on the pivot of reason and mis-reason (or ignorance and error) Boas, like the German idealists, assumed that each people's system of thought is qualitatively different from any other; he had more respect than Tylor for the uniqueness of foreign ideas, and his approach was to understand them on their own terms without imposing a framework of rationality. Boas' analysis of art is an example. Instead of regarding the painting and carving of the Northwest Coast Indians as awkward attempts at realistic representation, as Tylor

would have done, Boas tried to see them in terms of the principles which guide the eye and hand of the artist himself. Today we call this Boasian position cultural relativity – that no custom, behavior attitude, emotion and so on can be understood unless it is in the context of the culture for which it is apart.

Boas' realization that the mental life of a people must be approached on its own terms was not limited to the issue of what people think, but was extended to cover their perception or experiencing of the world as well. An example is his most famous article entitled "On Alternating Sounds" published incredibly in 1889. I say incredibly because it raises points relevant today. At the time he wrote this essay many philologists believed that primitive languages were less precise than civilized languages; and that this imprecision was evident in the phonetic systems of simpler languages. It was found that "savage" speakers pronounced the same word in a variety of ways, and it was assumed that the existence of these "alternating sounds" in a language was the sign of indefiniteness and therefore primitiveness. Boas showed that the reason the investigator heard sounds as alternating was that the analyst's language did not classify phonetic sounds the same way as his subject's. In effect Boas argued that to adequately understand a foreign language the investigator had to learn to think in terms of the phonetic distinctions of that tongue rather than his own. At a more general level, his argument was that experience – in this case the experience of hearing sounds – was not objective, but was structured and in that sense determined by the cultural tradition in which the individual was raised.

Boas rejected evolutionist data particularly conclusions reached by traveler accounts. Boas contended that travelers and others have erred in judging the behavior of foreign people – notice not “savages” – according to European standards. He gave as an example the European traveler, who hires native help for his journey. Since the traveler regards time as extremely valuable (time is a commodity in Western culture), he wants to reach his destination as soon as possible. But his “savage” employee is subject to an entirely different set of compulsions and does not feel the need to get started early. He delays, thoroughly irritating his employer and as a result the traveler regards the “savage” as fickle and impulsive in work habits. Boas notes that it would be just as reasonable for the native to charge that it is the traveler who is impulsive and lacking in self control because it is the traveler who becomes so “irritated by trifling cause like the loss of time.”

The point of this argument was that what was widely interpreted as the hereditary inferiority of “savages” is really a difference arising from social causes. The supposed inferiority of “primitives” is manifest only when the observer imposes Western European ideas on the native’s thought. This argument was repeated in other contexts and with respect to other features of cultural life such as language.

I have already said that Boas arrived at the view that each culture has a complex history; the implication is that each culture is unique. His argument about the need for thorough subjective understanding brought him to the same conclusion. The exotic beliefs of “primitive” man cannot be apprehended by the imposition of foreign – European – standards of value

and belief, including the criterion of reason, but must be understood in terms of their own distinctive principles.

This amounts to an even more fundamental denial of Tylor and others evolutionary theory than the failure to find evidence of the developmental stages in the historical record. The fact that evolutionary stages are not apparent in the data does not mean that they will not appear someday, but the fact that each cultural system of thought is completely unique means that the evolutionary framework which is to explain these stages is untenable. European standards of rationality could no longer constitute the basis for a single framework for understanding and comparison, so even if evolutionary stages were to emerge from Boas' data they would have to be explained in terms quite different from Tylor's. In place of reason as the basis of human institutions, Boas substituted emotion. This is the third important factor in the emergence of his culture concept.

The emotional conception of behavior was firmly embedded in Boas' thought by the first decade of the 20th century. The key to Boas formulation of the role of emotion is culture is the word habit. Boas thought that when an action is performed frequently over a period of time it becomes automatic, in that performance is ordinarily not combined with any degree of consciousness. For example, a person learns to eat with a knife and fork, and this becomes so habitual that it seems natural. It becomes governed by unconscious rather than conscious thought. In addition to being unconscious, habitual patterns acquire emotional associations: "Any action that differs from these performed by us habitually strike us immediately as ridiculous or objectionable.

Boas felt that the evolutionary anthropologists' failure to recognize the shackles of tradition which bound their thoughts was a major defect in their work. In brief, one of the principal errors committed by the evolutionary anthropologists is that they mistook their cultural rationalizations for unfettered rational thought. A universal standard of rationality cannot be the failure of institution to live up to that standard is due, not to ignorance and error, but to man's "irrational" attachment to the customs he has inherited from the past.

A word about Boas' use of the term "irrational. For Boas, cultures consisted of a series of thoughts about traditions, behavior, values, customs and so on. Culture is lodged in the mind as it is something learned and received. All thought, perception, emotion and experiencing is shaped/ determined by culture. It is not objective knowledge but rather subjective knowledge. And because there are unique and diverse cultures so too are patterns of thought unique and diverse.

The Meaning of Human Affairs – Culture is integrated

Boas explicitly recognized two historical processes, diffusion and modification. According to Boas, the cultural inventory of a people is almost entirely the cumulative result of diffusion, a process which has been operating continuously since humans became a tradition – culture – bearing animal. For Boas, the fabric of culture is made up of countless disparate threads, nearly all of which are of foreign origin. Once a new trait is acquired, however, it is molded to fit its new cultural context. Due to this process of modification or integration, the body of traits of a society tends to become welded into an integral whole: inconsistencies tend to be worked

out over time and the discrete elements making up the system tend to become interrelated. For example, Northwest Coast culture is dominated by an emphasis upon social competition and the pursuit of prestige, and yet, Boas notes that there are some very “amicable qualities” in the family life of those people.

Boas used the term subjective principles to mean the thought and behavior patterns of a cultural group. In view of Boas’ emphasis on ideational factors, it is not surprising that he conceived the principle of modification or integration primarily in subjective terms. Integration within the subjective sphere of culture consists in the process whereby traits are progressively modified according to a dominant idea or attitude.

Boas produced no theoretical framework that could be translated into guidelines for doing fieldwork. Theoretical frameworks were to come by way of the work of his students Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead, Robert Lowie and Alfred Kroeber to name but a few

Boas produced no definition of culture. Instead he concentrated on first, on refuting the evolutionist perspective and in doing so developed the characteristics of culture which today anthropologists still agree to even though they do not agree on a definition of culture. Boas established that culture is learned, shared, meaning centered and integrated. Moreover, Boas shifted anthropological thought from the origin of Culture to the investigation of individual cultures which Boas held to be unique and diverse. For Boas, cultures were composed of numerous traits, each with a history and situated as a result of diffusion.

Boas was primarily interested in the concept of culture not the concept of society. This is in part due to the evolution perspective which attempted to explain the origin of culture. It was also due to the fact that Boas viewed people as the repository of their culture. He wanted to get behind “the veil” of surface explanations of why they did and said what they said and did to the fundamental principles guiding thoughts and actions. This he believed were core values and patterns of values which gave the particular culture its sense of uniqueness.

Boas was the force behind much of “salvage cultural anthropology” which involved working with Native Americans to learn and document their traditional culture. Without this work, we would very little information, if any at all, about Native American life and rituals before contact with Anglo-Europeans.

Boas was solely responsible for institutionalizing anthropology in academia and for making anthropologists professionals. He established journals and was a prolific writer. His book “Anthropology” served as the chief text used in college courses. Boas was also responsible for increasing the public’s awareness of anthropology and the people anthropologists worked with.

Boas conducted fieldwork prior to Malinowski who is usually recognized as the father of fieldwork. Boas fieldwork was not as systematic as was Malinowski’s field study. In other words, he did not develop a systematic protocol for doing fieldwork. This was later developed by Boas’ students.

