

Lecture

- Boas attacked cultural evolutionist on empirical, theoretical and methodological grounds
- Empirical Issues: Boas challenged the evolutionists for forwarding speculative models that lacked adequate empirical grounds. The majority of 19th century cultural evolutionists, we might recall, relied upon material furnished by travelers, traders, missionaries etc. Boas asserted that a science of anthropology could not rest upon such flimsy foundations and he accused these 19th century evolutionists of being “armchair” anthropologists.
- In place of the kinds of unrestraint speculations that characterized much of the ethnologist works of the time Boas suggested firsthand empirical fieldwork and systematic collection of information on the cultures around the world. In absence of concrete empirical evidence on a range of cultures to back up models and schemes, Boas argued theories and schemes were worthless. As he put it: “ Unless we know how the culture of each group of man came to be what it is we cannot expect to reach any conclusion in regard to the conditions controlling the general history of culture.”
- Boas thus. set a new agenda for anthropology as he envisioned it, the systematic empirical documentation and description of cultural diversity.
- **Theoretical** Issues: First, he questioned the process of cultural evolution itself. His rejoinder to the idea of all cultures passing through the same fixed stages of evolutionary progress was to with any such process. Boas cited cases that involving cultures , that had skipped the presumably fixed stages of evolutionary development. For example, he pointed out that as a result of contact, certain African tribes had gone directly from the use of

stone technology to iron technology, bypassing the evolutionists' fixed stages of stone, bronze, and iron.

- **Second** Boas questioned the idea of progress so central to the work of 19th century evolutionists. Many of the evolutionary schemes of Boas's time were devised through the random selection of traits without reference to historical or geographical contexts and the arbitrary arrangement of cultures a hierarchy of stages of progress and complexity based upon criteria derived from European culture. Boas objected to these schemes and maintained that evaluating other cultures in terms of Western concepts such as "progress" or "complexity" was impossible and ethnocentric.
- **The evolutionist**, Boas observed were working on the basis of unproven assumptions. Their models did not derive from ethnographic data but were inventions that they imposed upon what flimsy information they did have. For example, one could argue that flintlock rifle is more complex than a bow and arrow. But how, Boas asked, can we say that European religions, forms of marriage, family types or landowning or property rights, are on a higher evolutionary level than those of other culture. How can we say that patrilineal organization evolved from matrilineal kinship system? On what grounds can one say that monogamous marriage is more advanced more complex than polyandrous marriage patterns. Various institutions differ from one culture to another, Boas argued, and there are no scientific criteria on the basis of which we can determine that one pattern is more advance than another.

- **Boas's answer to the problems he noted was to advocate ethnographic particularism and a relativistic approach that placed and focused attention on each culture's unique historical and geographical contexts.**
- Boas also challenged 19th century evolutionist on methodological grounds. He questioned the idea that "similar cultural developments were due to similar causes." In doing so, Boas launched anthropology on a path that was aimed at scientific research. As Boas puts it:

Anthropological research which compares similar cultural Phenomena from various parts of the world, in order to discover the uniform history of their development, make the assumption that the same ethnological phenomena have everywhere developed in the same manner. Here lies the flaw in the argument of [this] method for no such proof can be given. Even the most cursory review shows that the same phenomena may develop in a multitude of ways.

- Moreover Boas noted

The evolutionary point of view presupposes that the course of historical change in the cultural life of mankind follows definite laws which are applicable everywhere, and which bring about cultural development is, in its main lines the same among all races and all people....As soon as we admit that the hypothesis of uniform evolution has to be proven before it can be accepted, the whole structure loses its foundation.
- Boas argued that efforts at cross cultural comparisons and efforts to produce generalizations had to wait until the detailed ethnographic evidence was in hand.
- By rejecting the idea that "like causes will have like effects" Boas in effect dismissed the premise upon which are founded the positivist orientation in anthropology. Boas's orientation is highly compatible with contemporary interpretive approach in anthropology

- **The Biology and Cultural Issue.** Boas also set out to purge anthropology **of the evolutionists'** biological determinism – biology drives human culture. He did this by bringing to bear a large body of ethnographic data to show the degree to which the evolutionists had distorted indigenous people's ingenuity, linguistic sophistication, intelligence, and sociocultural accomplishments. Boas attacked the biological determinism of his rivals by calling into question the validity of racial typologies and the suggested linkages between biology and language/culture modes of thought/ behaviors
- **Racial Classification**
- **With respect to racial categories,** Boas argued that biological determinists had grossly underestimated the degree of variability in each human population. The racial category into which the evolutionist assigned different people "contains so many individuals of different hereditary make-up that the average differences between races freed of elements determined by history cannot readily be ascertained, but appear as insignificant.
- **With respect** to the idea that race and modes of thought/behavior are somehow linked, Boas noted that "in the few cases in which influence of culture upon mental reaction of population has been investigated it can be shown that culture is a much more important determinant than bodily build.

- It was Boas's position that although all human minds work alike -a perspective akin to the notion of "psychic unity of mankind" of the evolutionists – he suggested diversity and infinite expression in modes of thought due to the effects of individual cultures.

The Boasian Paradigm

- By demonstrating that culture, language, modes of thought, and biology were unrelated. Boas proposed cultural determinism and ethnographic particularism as an answer to the evolutionary models. He reformulated the concept of culture to mean distinct traditions and ways of life particular to each society. There were many different cultures, each one of unique and understandable in its culture, rather than a single culture as the evolutionist employed the term. For the latter culture was interchangeable with "civilization," something that some societies possessed and others were progressing towards.
- For Boas, it was the task of anthropology to document and describe the range of cultural variation around the globe. His call for attention to context and history led him to focus upon the complexity of culture and to take notice of the innumerable factors impinging upon each culture
- For Boas, the process of historical contact and diffusion was another reason to doubt the viability of the evolutionary stages and the cultural analogies and parallel and convergences that were central to the evolutionist schemes.
- Diffusion, the process of the transfer of innovations, artifacts, and other traits from one culture to another through contact and borrowing or migration was a conspicuous feature of Historical Particularism.. Boas was a "cautious "diffusionist" for he contended that the concept of

diffusion was useful in charting the distribution of traits only through a limited area. The Boasian concept of culture area developed from such a construal of diffusion.

- Boas treated every culture as unique, each with its own distinctive texture or “genius” and inner dynamic, shaped by its particular historical, psychological and social forces. Although Boas stressed the idea that cultures were whole, he was unclear about how elements related to the whole. He saw culture not as an “organic growth” but rather as a result of the accretion of elements brought together by diffusion – principle of modification.
- Boas believed that elements were integrated into the whole “according to the genius of the people who borrowed it. **Explain**
- Boas removal of culture from biological factors left him with only one determinant casual force, cultural itself. It was culture that shaped and molded human thought and behavior everywhere. Cultural determinism which can be expressed in the axiom that culture-comes-from-culture, was Boas’s answer to the biological determinism of the evolutionist. If culture is distinct from biology, and if culture is a determinant casual form, then it follows that culture can only be explained in terms of culture.

Cultural Relativism

- Cultural relativism was central to the Boasian paradigm and was treated as the precondition for “scientific objectivity.” According to Boas, “We must Investigate primitive life (explain Boas’s use of the term primitive” purely and objectively” The way to do that was for the anthropologist to “divest himself entirely of opinions and emotion based upon the particular environment into which he is born. He must

adapt his own mind, so far as feasible to that of the people whom he is studying.

- The kind of relativism advocated by Boas was wedded to an approach that magnified cultural differences and understated similarities. For this reason, Boas saw the task of cross cultural comparisons as eminently problematic because of the difficulties of establishing whether units of culture being compared were in fact equivalent categories or dissimilar ones bearing only surface likeness to each other. This kind of relativism remains a part of anthropological thought in the United States today and is the rationale for continued rejection of generalizing scientific approaches.
- Boas is generally credited for establishing fieldwork as an essential component of anthropology. However, he did not invent ethnographic field research, nor did he develop innovative field strategies. There was already an established tradition of fieldwork in the United States when Boas arrived on the scene.
- The field methods Boas himself employed were not all that different from the procedures of his contemporaries, although he tended to be more inclusive and systematic. Boas was also more diligent and critical than his contemporaries. His adherence to the high standards of empirical work was without parallel. Moreover, Boas demanded that the fieldworker learn the native language and to try and capture the “native’s point of view,” This is another area that is at the basis of Interpretive or Geertzian anthropology.