

Franz Boas and the Discovery of Culture

Senior Honors Thesis by Tal Liron

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Introduction

Why Boas? Or, rather, why now?

Franz Boas is often credited for the founding of American four-field anthropology, for adding the plural form to the academic, and later popular, notion of “culture,” and for using science and academic authority to combat racism. These are, however, controversial, muted achievements. University departments are abandoning the four-field segregation. Many today, within anthropology and without, lament the plurality of “culture” and its politicization. Furthermore, reassessments of his work have raised the suspicion that, in order to further his politics, and perhaps his career, he practiced bad science. It is tempting to stick him in a textbook, with all due credit, and to move on.

No paradigm, however, really dies out in anthropology. In refusing Boas, one must go back to previous paradigms, and defend them against Boas’ criticism. Alternatively, one can deconstruct Boas and pick and choose the fragments, fitting him into new paradigms. In both cases, however, one must deal with the reality of the far-reaching political success of his twist on “culture.” Since Boas, “culture” has become a rallying cry for demanding rights and privileges in the name of difference, or, on the same basis, for denying them. Anthropologists, to use a term that literary critic Terry Eagleton coined and applied to his colleague, Slavoj Žižek, could be seen as “technicians of difference,” entangled in local and global webs of otherness, trying to make sense of it, explain its origins and purposes, and unveil its political significance. The arena, for good or for ill, is dominated by “culture,” which still displays, to those in the know, Boas’ meandering footprints.

Boas, however, resists frontal attacks. There is no coherent “Boasian” school of anthropology to disassemble, at least not one that he was responsible for. The generation of American anthropologists trained by Boas all continued in very different paths. Ruth Benedict saw “culture” as tightly integrated, while for Robert Lowie it was a “thing of shreds and patches.” To attack Boas, one must know him personally, as an intellectual, a scientist, a German Jewish émigré, an activist, a colleague, a teacher, a husband, and a father. It is here that this work begins.

Where this work will take us may come as a surprise. Though his career developed in America, his training was German, as were his intellectual challenges. It was almost a fluke, or at least a secondary development, that turned “culture” into “cultures.” The primary issue was the segregation within German academia between two forms of scientific inquiry, one physical, concerned with the formulation of scientific “laws,” the other historical and descriptive, concerned with blatant and hidden patterns. Boas, trained between the two, ended up practicing his science far from German universities, in Baffin Island, in the Pacific Northwest, and in the cities of the United States. There, in foreignness, in loneliness, due to the specific circumstances of his work and his own flexible mind, he relieved some of the tension between these two kinds of knowledge, leaving in its place a workable ambiguity that was to be one of the ingredients of his, and our, concept of “culture.”

Childhood

Was it his Jewish background, his revolutionary mother, his quest for fame, his social consciousness, his German academic training, his fieldwork, or his own genius that inspired Franz Uri Boas to fight the ideology of scientific racism with “culture?” Establishing causality, or even continuity, between his childhood interests, his personality, and his academic career goals is difficult, because the stated goal of 19th century Germany universities was to steer the minds of young men and women firmly on the path of the traditional academic disciplines. Because Boas followed this path, it is thus easy and correct to place him as inheritor of his teachers Bastian and Virchow, and many other German intellectuals that he had studied, and yet there is no evidence as to whether the men who influenced him would have come up with the same theories, and used them to the same effect, were they in his shoes. Boas faced many challenges in both his career and his thought, and his responses to these challenges often surprised his colleagues, even those very close to him. He was an original, inspired thinker. Where, we might ask, did this inspiration come from? He answered in his own words:

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 of 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. Thus I was spared the struggle against religious dogma that besets the lives of so many young people.¹

He was not, however, spared the struggle against racism. Though he waged war upon it from America, using tools of his own invention, much of his ammunition was provided for him at the lions’ den: Germany, and in particular the German academia in which he was trained. On the one hand, the reality of scientific racism. On the other hand, the ideals of 1848.

Both of these hands, however, did not play out significantly in his youth. He was born in 1858, the fourth child of Meier and Sophie Boas. An elder sister and an elder brother died young, leaving Franz with one older sibling, five years his elder, Antonie, known affectionately as Toni, with whom he had a close relationship. Another important influence was Abraham Jacobi, who was a close friend of his mother, and later married her sister. Jacobi was an active communist who associated with both Marx and Engels. Sophie tried to press upon him the urgency to include women in the revolution.² It was shortly after his arrest, in 1851, that Sophie married Meier Boas. “Uncle Jacobi” was an important friend and confidant throughout the development of Franz’s career. As for Franz’s parents, both belonged to respected Jewish families, and both were born in Minden, a small city in Westphalia, Prussia, with a tight Jewish community. Franz lived there for much of his childhood.

¹ Stocking 1974, p. 41

² Cole 1999, p. 15

A mandatory autobiographical essay Boas wrote upon graduating from the Minden Gymnasium reveals many personal details of Boas' early childhood.³ He wrote of feeling the absence of a brother (he had two younger sisters), and of how his mother's kindergarten developed children's "interest in nature by games which imitated animal life, and by keeping [their] own flower beds which [they] had to sow, water and care for."⁴ Accompanied by Hermann Wagner's children's books about nature, he explored the woodlands of Clus, just outside Minden. His favorite book, *Robinson Crusoe*, inspired him, when he was not yet nine years old, to "train" himself for future voyages in Africa and America, by depriving himself of foods he liked, and running for hours through rain and snow. In the all-male Gymnasium, he continued to keep the moss and flower herbarium he had in kindergarten, and also became fascinated with zoology and geography. At age eleven, he discovered geology and astronomy. Despite his enthusiasm, his grades were sometimes poor, perhaps due to severe headaches he suffered from at the time.

The Franco-Prussian war broke out in 1870. Minden, a garrison city, was mobilized for battle, and everyone volunteered to support the effort. It was an exciting time for young Franz. There was pride in the German victory, and a new destiny inspired by the unity of the German Reich, but also the occasion of the Commune, of which he writes, "moved [him] no less than the war."⁵ These were difficult times for the Boas family. First, Toni was sent to a girls' pension in Jena, accompanied by her mother, but was soon moved back to a sanatorium near home due to her rheumatism. Then, Franz was also sent to a boarding school there, though his reason for returning, as is suggested in a letter by his father, was that the school did not accommodate Jews.⁶ Nevertheless, in his short time in Jena he studied with a Dr. Dietrich, who introduced him to "true science," that "consists not in describing single plants, but in a knowledge of their structure and life in the comparison of all classes of plants with one another."⁷ The return to the Gymnasium in Minden was unhappy. Because his father was often away on business, Franz had to rent a room. Alone in Minden, homesick, worried about his sister, Franz did poorly. He described it as "almost the worst period of [his] life."⁸ The worst came when he was forced to repeat a year at the Gymnasium. As a consolation, his understanding parents sent him on holiday. He spent much of it exploring the outdoors, and then joined his family at Porta Westphalia, where they rented a cottage. His studies at Porta Westphalia hinted at the originality that was to come. He was devising his own biological classification system, quite different from the Linnaean, inspired by the creative vision of science offered by Alexander von Humboldt's works, which he read during his free time. At long last, he reached the final level of the Gymnasium, and devoted himself to schoolwork, not wishing to repeat his previous failure. He worked so hard that it worried his mother, but it paid off, as he successfully passed the final examination on February 12, 1877, a date which he identified in an excited telegraph to Toni as Darwin's birthday.

³ Cole, p. 17

⁴ Cole, p. 18

⁵ Cole, p. 21

⁶ Cole, p. 23

⁷ Cole, p. 25

⁸ Cole, p. 23

The battle for his future began. His father wanted him to study medicine, but by then Franz was committed to the natural sciences. He explained his passion in a letter to Toni: “Chiefly because my favorite sciences are the comparative ones and medicine has little to do with these, I have no real desire for medicine.”⁹ Eventually, his father gave in, and Franz left for the University of Heidelberg, choosing it primarily because it was close to Toni, who was at Stuttgart at the time. He intended to spend a semester there, and then to move on to another university.

⁹ Cole, p. 29

University Life

Much of Boas' career as a student may seem to be a detour through the "hard" sciences, after which he returned to the "soft" sciences. Toni wrote later: "After long years of infidelity, my brother was reconquered [sic] by geography, the first love of his boyhood."¹⁰ As we shall see, Toni had much to do with this "reconquest." In order to be near her in her illness, Franz ended up in the wrong setting for embarking on a career in physics. The role of his family circumstances and childhood dreams in this accident notwithstanding, it was very much within the regime of German academia to move thus between fields. Not merely a detour, his university years provided him with distinct, though ambiguous, categories in which to start a career.

The tools for a 19th century German student included not only the pen, but also the sword. Boas was very studious, but also found time for and was forced to get involved in his volatile social and political surroundings. Later, on his way to Baffin Island, he wrote: "I must now wonder how I could for four years be in the midst of that wild and irresponsible life, which would now sicken me in a day."¹¹ There is, as we shall see later, an uncanny resemblance between his experience as member of a student fraternity and his ethnographic depiction of the Kwakiutl. These extracurricular lessons left a mark on his education, and also left him physically disfigured for life.

As mentioned earlier, Boas' first stop was Heidelberg, a city rich in romance and science. In that picturesque town, strewn with ruins, epochal discoveries were being made in the physical sciences by Gustav, Kirchhoff, Helmholtz and Bunsen.¹² Young Franz was enthralled. He was, however, lonely. To make friends, he joined the mathematics and fencing clubs, the latter proving most beneficial, because soon after joining he was challenged to a duel.

The circumstances of the duel were typical. Boas lent an acquaintance the use of the piano he had rented for his room, but his student neighbors complained about the noise. Apparently, this acquaintance was not much of a musician. Boas tried to give him his money back, and cancel the deal, and when that didn't work, Boas asked him to play on a different schedule. One evening, some students in the courtyard ridiculed the piano playing, and Boas took it personally. He yelled at them to come in and play their "kiddies' symphony."¹³ In that moment of fury, he had moved the game to the next level. Immediately, he was formally challenged to a *Mensur*. The duel, fought to wound the opponent's face, took place a month later. Boas lost a large piece of his scalp, but won.

Returning home for the holidays at the end of the semester, he was told that Reinhard Krüer, one of his few friends from the Gymnasium and the best student in his class, had drowned.¹⁴ Boas was crushed, and this event may have influenced his decision for his academic future. He decided against physiology, which he loved, because it would take too long to complete, and instead chose to study physics at one of the best places to do so, in Bonn, under Rudolph Clausius. Upon arrival, he rented a piano and hung up photos of his parents and of Reinhard. With the death of his friend, loneliness became

¹⁰ Cole, p. 57

¹¹ Cole, p. 61

¹² Cole, p. 38

¹³ Cole, p. 41

¹⁴ Cole, p. 43

intolerable. He wrote to Toni: "I cannot be alone. If I were, I would think too much about the past, about what cannot be altered."¹⁵ And so, Boas joined the Alemannia fraternity in Bonn. He already knew a few people there and quickly made many more friends. The Alemannia was the natural choice for him among the Burschenschaften, a group of three liberal, constitutional, pan-Germanic movements. The Alemannia typically recruited from Westphalia, and was also the last of the Burschenschaften to exclude Jews. Boas wrote: "I would never have thought such close ties between the whole group were at all possible. We are 21, constantly together. You would think there would be cliques formed, and certainly one is closer to some than to others, but we stand all for one and one for all."¹⁶ As a member of the Alemannia, even serving as its secretary for one semester, Boas fought many duels in its honor.

Boas grew culturally in Bonn. He studied dance, formed a music trio, joined the choir, and attended many concerts, and even operas in neighboring Cologne. He also became interested in one Fraulein Hirth, a Jew he had met at a dance class. It was surprising that he found time for any of these other activities, because he audited many more classes than were required for his degree. In between the intensive physics and math, he also found time for a few geography classes with Theobald Fischer, who was an "old boy" of the Burschenschaften, and also the only professor at Bonn with whom he had a lasting relationship. Fischer had an interesting past himself, beginning as a historian, but then, after much travel, coming to specialize in Mediterranean physical geography and geology. One of these classes was about polar research, taught while preparations were under way for the First International Polar Year, 1882-1883. For Boas, it was a scene straight from his childhood fantasy.

Boas' next step after Bonn was, like his decision to go to Heidelberg, influenced by Toni's condition. Her health had deteriorated, spreading to the hip, and she was moved to Kiel. He wanted to go to Berlin, in order to write his doctoral dissertation under Hermann von Helmholtz, but his mother was too busy with his younger siblings to be with Toni, and so he ended up in Kiel, to be near her, where he worked under Gustav Karsten, who was far from the cutting edge of German physics. Happily, Theobald Fischer had also just moved there from Bonn, and Boas took some of his seminars on volcanism, earthquakes, and the history of geography. Both Boas and Fischer were rather displeased with their opportunities at Kiel. Boas' time there was divided between laboratory work towards his dissertation and visiting Toni at the hospital. Initially, he wanted to write about Gauss' law of the normal distribution of errors, but Karsten urged him to work on the optical properties of water. It turned out to be wholly unsatisfying to Boas: "If someone had told me a few semesters ago that I would submit such a dissertation, I would have laughed at him. But one learns to be content."¹⁷ It did, however, lead him into a surprising new direction. Experiencing many difficulties in assessing the color of water in his experiments, Boas turned to Benno Erdmann, a philosopher at Kiel, slightly older than him, who studied Kant and sensory knowledge. Erdmann encouraged Boas to write about the nature of these difficulties. And so, Boas' first scholarly publication was in the "soft" scientific field of psychophysics, which was concerned with how organisms perceived their environment via their senses. A future in hard physics was

¹⁵ Cole, p. 44

¹⁶ Cole, p. 45

¹⁷ Cole, p. 53

looking dimmer, but other possibilities were opening up. Boas was thinking of applying physics to geography, and perhaps, even, of embarking on expeditionary work. Furthermore, Erdmann introduced him to the work of F. A. Lange, which brought him to seriously question his purely materialistic starting point.

In Kiel, Boas also came face to face with anti-Semitism. At the time, Bismarck was allying with Adolf Stöcker's Christian Socialist Worker's Party to fight "Jewish liberalism," and anti-Semitism, previously obscure, was suddenly attractive and relevant to students. At Heidelberg and Bonn, students were not involved, but at Kiel some were signing the Anti-Semitic League petitions to the government, demanding that it restrict "Jewish ideas."¹⁸ The anti-Semites were still an ostracized minority at Kiel when Boas was there, amounting to 80 of 300 students, and Boas, the skilled dueler, was not personally targeted. Nevertheless, he briefly mentioned in a letter to his father that he was involved in some duels that had to do with the "cursed Jewish situation."¹⁹ Though he was to become thoroughly engaged in social action in America, at this time his thoughts were on building his career, and his studies. A letter from Fischer mentioned that Boas was even considering conversion to Christianity.

Soon after his doctoral examination, and having failed to receive a fellowship at the new Johns Hopkins University, Boas was to begin his mandatory year in the military. During this summer of 1881, in a magical holiday in the Harz Mountains, he met his future wife, Marie, daughter of Dr. Ernst Krackowizer, who was a friend of Jacobi, a fellow 1848-er, and a fellow émigré to America. For his military service, Boas wanted to be stationed in Göttingen, where he could work with geographer Hermann Wagner (apparently unrelated to Moritz Wagner), but, honoring his parent's requests, he returned, after four years absence, to his hometown, Minden. In addition to his army work, he had to help his family in building their new "Villa Boas," for which work began when the old town's fortifications were torn down. Nevertheless, he found time for considerable private research. This impressed his mother, who compared his ability to concentrate to that of Jacobi.²⁰ He spent the first six months on psychophysics, and then on geography, specifically the "quite special and simple case" of "the dependence of contemporary migrating Eskimos upon the configuration and physical relationships of the land."²¹ Boas began itching for an expedition.

Upon finishing his service, he moved to Berlin, and began preparing for an Arctic expedition, though he had no ready sponsor. Through a friend of the family, he arranged a meeting with Johann Wilhelm Reiss, vice president of the Berlin Geographical Society. The meeting was pivotal. Within days he was going through the Royal Museum's Eskimo collection with Adolf Bastian. Bastian recommended him to the German Polar Commission, which was planning an expedition, but it seemed that Boas would not be able to secure funding in time. Taking initiative, he proposed to write a series of articles about the expedition for a major Berlin daily, the *Berliner Tageblatt*. It worked, and Boas received an advance against fifteen articles. His parents were not as thrilled with this victory as he was, and so it was due to his father's insistence that he decided to take Wilhelm Weike, a family servant, with him on the expedition. He continued preparations,

¹⁸ Cole, p. 59

¹⁹ Cole, p. 60

²⁰ Cole, p. 64

²¹ Cole, p. 65

studying Danish, English and Eskimo languages, cartography, astronomy with Ernst Becker, photography with H. W. Vogel, and anthropometry with Rudolf Virchow. Bastian and Virchow were to become Boas' role-models. Friedrich Ratzel's *Anthropogeographie* was just published, and to Boas it became a handbook of the problems he was investigating.²² All these exciting developments happened in Berlin, where Boas enjoyed cultural riches he had only dreamed of before.

All this may sound like makeshift preparation, and despite Boas' enthusiasm, it was. The itinerary for his expedition was unusual in its emphasis on a limited region, that of the mostly unexplored Baffin Island, but also in its furious pace, which followed the Eskimo migration route of his hypothesis. Boas was planning on ending his expedition in the United States, where he hoped to seek further career opportunities, and to see Marie. At first, he restrained himself from thinking about her, as he was about to embark on a dangerous voyage, but the doubt tortured him, and he decided to confess his love to her but a month before departure. Coincidentally, just before he had posted his letter, Toni confessed that she had already taken the initiative, and that Marie had replied favorably. Within three weeks, Franz and Marie were engaged, and he left for Baffin Island, motivated not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of their shared future.

²² Liss 1996, p. 175

The Physicist and the Cosmographer

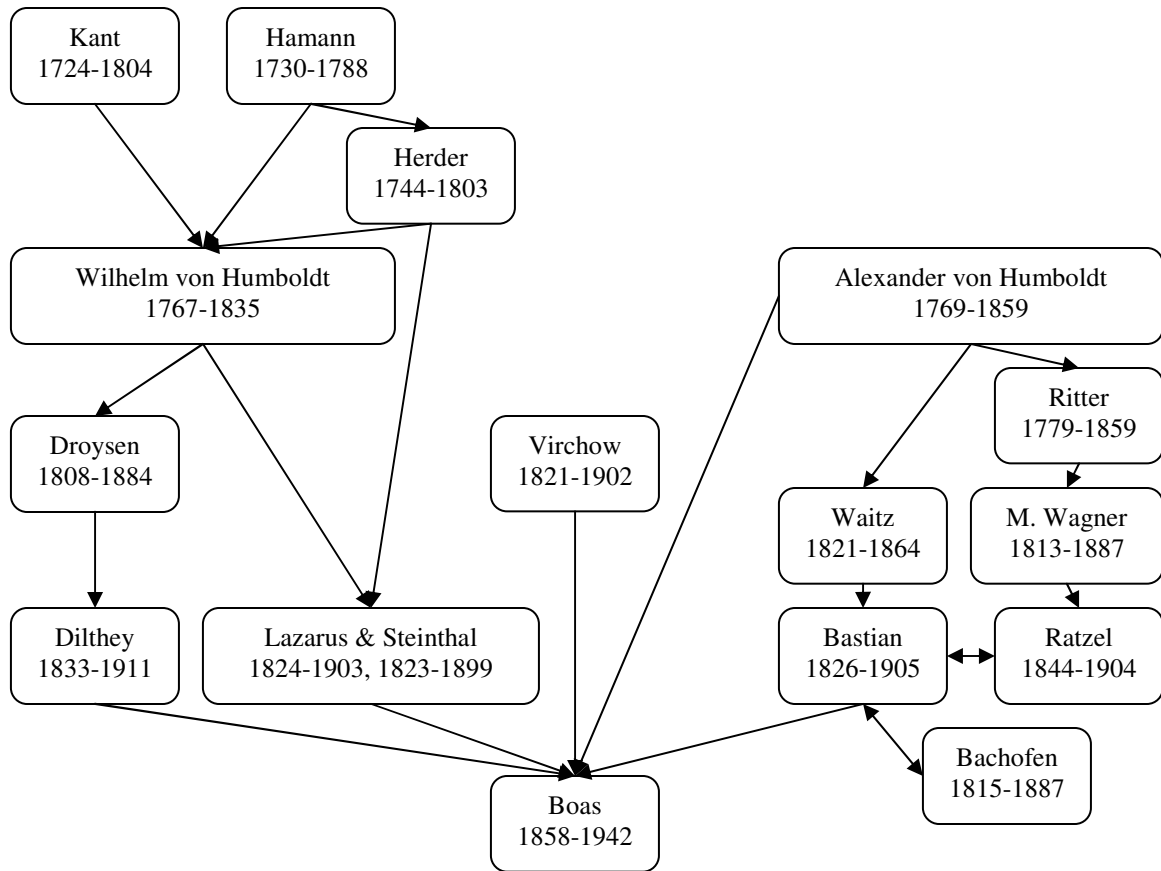


Figure 1 – Franz Boas’ Academic Heritage

Boas began his studies at a time of tension between scientific paradigms. German academia recognized two kinds of science, which the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), whom Boas read and often cited, called *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. The former is readily translated as natural sciences, but the latter, often translated as human sciences, or spiritual sciences, requires some explanation. The well-worn humanities, inherited as *humanitas* from Greece of the 5th century BCE, revived during the Renaissance as *studia humanitatis*, the study of the human as opposed to the divine, were finally, in the 19th century, left behind by an emerging scientific paradigm. Dilthey agreed that humanities were inherently different, but not that they were inferior. Sciences sought explanations, while humanities attempted to understand the human mind not by self-reflection, but by reflecting on its products, such as language, art, and social institutions. Dilthey’s breakthrough was in finding scientific worth in the method of humanities, thus redefining them as human sciences. He was suggesting a new way of approaching what was considered, until then, to be the domain of science. The natural sciences and the human sciences were set as two alternative scientific methodologies. The generic practitioners, as Boas later described them in *The Study of*

Geography, published in *Science* in 1887, were the physicist for *Naturwissenschaften* and the cosmographer for *Geisteswissenschaften*. The former sought the laws of the universe, while the latter described it, seeking historical patterns rather than laws. The methods were, respectively, the deductive, or “physical,” and the interpretive, or “historical.” Cosmographers produced cosmographies, classifications of observed phenomena that could then be studied in relationship to each other. Patterns revealed by such study were considered phenomena in themselves, “deeper” than those directly observed phenomena, but not less “real.” While Boas ended up as more of a geographer, which by his training meant a cosmographer of planet Earth, he trained to become a physicist.²³ By the time Dilthey was writing about it, this tension, between the pursuits of the physicist and the cosmographer, already had a long tradition in Germany, beginning with the cosmographical pursuits of two Prussian brothers of a previous generation, Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the senior, was educated in the Berlin Enlightenment, and later much influenced by the critique of it. The critique came from many quarters, such as the moderate Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the more radical Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), for whom reason was entirely contingent on history, and Hamann’s student, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who went even further by identifying reason with history. For Herder, a *Geist*, a collective spirit, was inseparable from its *Volk*, a group of people with a shared history. Together, they were one: *Volksgeist*. Herder was not dismissing the existence of an objective History, but rather reducing it to its atoms, *Volksgeister*, which could be individually observed and studied. Herder intended the study of *Volksgeist* to be a rigorous, practical, and coherent alternative to that of the Enlightenment. It was to continue Herder’s project, by defining its method in Kantian terms, that Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote his *Plan for a Comparative Anthropology*. The method was decidedly inductive and historical, and Humboldt was well aware of the political implications of such a decision: by making history relevant to the present, he was shifting emphasis of responsibility and accountability from the living individual to the collective past. In his own words:

For this is what distinguishes the historian from the natural scientist and the philosopher: he limits his dealings to that which had happened, and regards his field as neither nature nor will, but fate and accident, for whose individual quirks, at least in their detail, no one is responsible.²⁴

Later, Humboldt’s pioneering work in linguistics, following his comparative anthropology program, recognized all languages as complete and worthy manifestations of *Volksgeist*, very unlike the philological hierarchy described by his contemporaries. Such a manifestation, which Humboldt called *Nationalcharakter*, the “features of a people,” varied for each *Volksgeist*. The degree of achievement for a people was measured in relation to its ideal *Nationalcharakter* potential. Boas would later demand the same respect for something called “culture.”

Because Boas probably did not read Wilhelm von Humboldt,²⁵ the striking similarity of his approach to anthropology and Humboldt’s suggests a significant debt

²³ Boas 1996

²⁴ Bunzl 1996, pp. 23-4

²⁵ Bunzl, p. 24

both owe to their shared intellectual background. There are, however, direct, though critical, inheritances. First was through Dilthey, who rejected the positivism of Comte and Mill, and saw *Verstehen* (understanding, interpretation) as an alternative foundation for all the human sciences. For Dilthey, it was only through experience (or, rather, re-experience, because experiences were gone as soon as they occurred, and could not be studied directly) that one could obtain any kind of knowledge of the human condition. Dilthey's *Verstehen* was taken directly from Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), a leading historian and advocate of German unification under Prussia, who referred to Humboldt reverently as "the Bacon of historical sciences,"²⁶ and distinguished *Verstehen* (Humboldtian) knowledge from *Erklären* (explanation), that of the natural sciences. Importantly, unlike Herder (and Humboldt), Dilthey was concerned with individual minds, not collective *Geist*. Thus, Boas' idea of culture could not have come from Humboldt through Dilthey. The other route from Wilhelm von Humboldt was Boas' training in the *Völkerpsychologie* discipline of Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903) and Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899), which assumed a collective mind that manifested as language, mythology, religion, and customs. Though Lazarus and Steinthal used Humboldt's *Nationalcharakter* approach, and even adapted Herder's *Volksgeist*, their project, in stark contrast to Humboldt's, was explicitly looking for scientific laws of human development. Considering *Verstehen* and *Völkerpsychologie* as two conflicting inheritances from Humboldt, it could be said that Humboldt transmitted to Boas, through Dilthey on the one hand, and Lazarus and Steinthal on the other, a sharper version of the academic tension of his own generation, that between the particular and the universal, between the humble attempt at description and the ambitious search for explanation.

Wilhelm's younger brother, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), was, perhaps, the first modern cosmographer. Though both brothers used the historical method, Wilhelm was working in the humanities, primarily in history, where cosmographies of some sort were already acceptable, while Alexander was applying the historical method, quite radically at the time, to the natural sciences. He found the complexity of the Cosmos overwhelming, and preferred modest "empirical laws," local and descriptive, to "natural laws." As mentioned earlier, Boas read Humboldt as a child. As an adult academician, however, Humboldt's influence was filtered through the more ambitious lens of the geographer Karl Ritter (1779-1859), Humboldt's protégé. Humboldt wrote, in his five-volume masterpiece, *Kosmos*, of "the admirable work... in which Karl Ritter so ably delineates the physiognomy of our globe, and shows the influence of its external configuration on the physical phenomena on its surface, on the migrations, laws, and manners of nations, and on all the principal historical events enacted upon the face of the earth."²⁷ Despite this blessing, Ritter, moving away from the Humboldt brothers, was not nervous about universal laws. He tried, by formulating the "empirical laws" that Alexander von Humboldt was careful to avoid, to situate humanity in nature. In this tradition, the zoologist Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), influenced by Ritter's student, Moritz Wagner (1813-1887), developed an ambitious theory of a reciprocal relationship between nature and humans in his *Anthropogeographie*, the book which Boas read just before leaving for Baffin Island. Ratzel was concerned with the history of population movements, and the diffusion of traits, which he believed to be the only plausible cause

²⁶ Bunzl, pp. 26-7

²⁷ Bunzl, p. 40

for their similarity over the world. The “diffusion camp” was associated with the idea, often framed in terms of Biblical historiography, that humanity had a common origin. During Ratzel’s time, it was sharply opposed to the “independent invention camp,” which denied that traits were diffused historically, and was, conversely, associated with theories of biological evolution. Ratzel’s contribution was in making diffusion more scientific, by replacing the Bible with Ritter’s geography. He believed his method could, eventually, provide a better explanation for human diversity than theories of biological evolution.

Unlike Ratzel, Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), who was to become Boas’ mentor in anthropology and later president of the geographical society founded by Ritter, emphasized independent invention without entirely rejecting diffusion. He saw his main task as a museum collector, a worthy cosmographical pursuit. Nevertheless, he was in favor of what he called “ethnology,” which was defined in terms of trying to make sense of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos*. Ethnology was entirely cosmographical. Any “laws” that it purported to discover were nothing more than historical patterns, in the same way that Darwinian evolution described a deep pattern in biological history. Ethnology was to bring the human sciences, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, into the natural sciences, the *Naturwissenschaften*. The responsibility for such a project – and it was a heavy one – Bastian left to his followers:

Ethnology, that newly rising star of science, seemed to offer a ray of hope, hope that we might finally find a solution to the contemporary situation in which our world view is both unsure and fragmented. Ethnology seemed to offer the chance to put the Science of Man on the same solid base of actual proof as we find now in the natural sciences... Yet these daring intentions soon began to crumble to dust as we looked into the more intricate depths of the materials so copiously accumulated... It is my considered opinion, and the situation corroborates this, that we must abandon our aim... such an achievement is not for our generation.²⁸

Boas carried this torch. However, in his fieldwork, he learned to appreciate the enormity of the challenge. He would, eventually, pass it on to his students, at the same time being accused by his critics of himself abandoning, if not sabotaging, the quest for universality. Boas inherited his vehement opposition to grandiose evolutionary ethnology directly from Bastian, and turned it into a crusade.

Bastian’s ethnological theory is inseparable from that of his contemporary, the Swiss expert on Roman law, Johann Jacob Bachofen (1815-1887). Bachofen considered primitive religion to be as fully developed as modern religion, and argued vehemently for recognition of the innate power of ideas to shape history independent of their environment. Bastian applied this same principle to all specific *Völkergedanken* (folk thoughts) associated with a specific *Volk*, which he interpreted as variations on universal *Elementargedanken* (elementary ideas), such as fetishism, monism, dualism, heaven, husband, and wife. Independent “invention” sprouted from these. Together, these ideas were coherently organized as *Weltanschauungen*, or world views. Bastian dedicated his first major work, *Mankind in History*, published in 1860, to Alexander von Humboldt.²⁹ Through Bastian, Boas also came to know the work of Theodor Waitz (1821-1864), whose *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* Robert Lowie called a “forerunner of Boas’ *The*

²⁸ Bunzl, p. 50

²⁹ Leaf 1979, pp. 117-20

*Mind of Primitive Man.*³⁰ Waitz was very skeptical of “natural” explanations for diversity, such as climate variations. He listed three other determining factors, all of them man-made: the physical organization of a group (its living arrangements), the form of its spiritual life, and the sum of its social relations. He rejected, on this basis, all attempts to classify humanity according to physical traits. Waitz argued passionately for a Herderian twist on the French Enlightenment’s “psychic unity of humanity.” It was true that humanity was united in rationality, but this rationality varied widely in its manifestation. It was, and still is, a gripping vision, and fitting inspiration for one who would eventually be regarded by his students the founder of American anthropology.

Just as Boas inherited a tension from the elder Humboldt, from Alexander von Humboldt, through Ritter and Ratzel and the one hand, and Bastian and Bachofen on the other, Boas inherited a yearning for Herderian universality, tempered with good old scientific skepticism of jumping to conclusion too soon. It was a very specific, ethnological version of universality.

In addition to inspiration, German academia provided Boas with much to revolt against. Beyond the anti-Semitism that he experienced firsthand, academicians toiled to base racial discrimination on moral and scientific grounds. This was, however, a new development. German physical anthropology, under the leadership of Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), had by far the most liberal attitude towards race of any anthropological tradition, particularly in comparison to the French and American physical anthropology of the period. Much has been written about the German roots of Aryanism, and one can trace intellectual and political lineages from Luther to Hitler, or at least from Herder and the German Romantics. In the hard sciences, the history seemed to begin with Ernst Haeckel and the social Darwinists. Their work, however, was linguistic and archaeological, and German biologists, including physical anthropologists, resisted it, at least until the turn of the century.³¹ Boas was firmly planted in this liberal tradition.

In 1869, Virchow led the founding of the first German anthropological society, the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*. It soon became a scientific center with a vast sphere of influence, having 2,350 members in 1884, covering the Reich, Austria, Germanic Switzerland, Hungary, Bohemia, Poland, the Baltic countries, the Balkans, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and eventually America through Boas, Japan through Erwin von Bälz, and Argentina through Paul Adolf Lehmann-Nitzsche. Virchow’s discipline was primarily medical, and he enforced complete separation between philosophy and the “non-medical” natural sciences, like zoology and geology. A physical anthropologist was usually an amateur, a professor of medicine who practiced anthropology as a hobby, and so the discipline had virtually no professorial chairs.³² Leading this diverse “discipline” required a strong personality, and Virchow was the right man for the task.

Virchow was the leader of the anti-Bismarck Progressive Party, a direct opponent of the anti-Semite Adolf Stöcker, and one of the few officials to publicly protest the rise of Judeophobia. This led to false rumors that he was Jewish himself. He was a cellular pathologist by training, a “staunch empiricist”³³ who treated Darwinian evolution as an

³⁰ Bunzl, p. 44

³¹ Massin 1996, p. 80

³² Massin, p. 84

³³ Massin, p. 82

unproven hypothesis, to the point of being quite anti-Darwinian. It was partly on this basis that he rejected theories that identified “lesser races” as primitive evolutionary ancestors of “higher races,” or that “animalized” them by classifying them as closer to apes than to mankind. He was, moreover, an unswerving monogenist. Monogenism paralleled the idea of diffusion in ethnology by attributing a single origin to the human species. Polygenism, conversely, argued that human races were traces of a past of multiple human species, and some went so far as to classify certain races as species apart from the rest of humanity. Despite the lack of direct evidence, Virchow was certain of the unity of the human species, and admitted to a sentimental, even traditional – though not religious – attachment to the idea.³⁴

Though he maintained an environment intolerant of polygenism within the society, even Virchow worked within a hierarchical racial paradigm, maintaining the traditional distinction between *Naturvölker*, the primitive, “natural” races, and *Kulturvölker*, the civilized, “cultural” races. Culture was not a racial trait, but was, nonetheless, the property of a select few peoples, who had acquired it with varying degrees of success. This correlated, roughly, with an assumed racial hierarchy of mental capacities. When he discovered in his research that 11% of German Jewish children had blond hair and blue eyes, Virchow defined them as members of a “national race” instead of a purely anthropological “race,” yet still referred to Jewish physical characteristics, such as the “Jewish nose.” His discipline, in fact, paid little attention to Jews, with only six articles about them appearing among several thousand published in the last quarter of the century.³⁵ It was similarly uninterested in the idea of a “German race.” Virchow blasted it, referring to “blood superstition,” “nativist fanatics,” and a “residue of prehistorical times.”³⁶ His response to the French anti-Darwinist M. de Quatrefages’ accusation that the idea of German unity was based on an “anthropological mistake” was: “Should we ask everyone, now that we build our State, to which ethnic group he belongs? To which race he is related? No, M. de Quatrefages, we do not carry on such politics. Modern Germany is no longer the land of the old Teutonic tribes.”³⁷ All of Virchow’s major colleagues, such as his lieutenant, Johannes Ranke, and Julius Kollmann, were just as outspoken. His successor, Felix von Luschan, though he was later to embrace eugenics, wrote earlier of the time when Semites were erecting civilization, while

we Germans were still living in caves and earth holes and had barely learned to transform silex [flint] into implements... [The] educated European recognized in his Jewish fellow citizen not only the living witness and heir of an ancient and venerable culture, but also respects and esteems and loves him as his best and most faithful co-worker and fire-comrade in the fight for the highest goods of this earth, in the fight for Progress and intellectual freedom.³⁸

As the fight against scientific racism became a fight for the integrity and defense of the entire discipline, the members of the society were almost compelled to speak up. They began to categorize themselves as the professionals and the scientists, and the race

³⁴ Massin, p. 87

³⁵ Massin, p. 90

³⁶ Massin, p. 91

³⁷ Massin, pp. 100-1

³⁸ Massin, p. 90

theorists as the amateurs and the pseudo-scientists. This condescension, together with Virchow's attempt to enforce a monogenist "ethic" in anthropological publications, separated the two camps by mutual contempt. In America, Boas was to hold a similar attitude towards amateur anthropology. There were, however, publications that Virchow's society did not control, and in these margins race theorists, such as Ludwig Woltmann and Wilhelm Schallmayer, the founder of German eugenics, maintained some scientific authority. A few were low-profile members of the society itself.

Boas also inherited the faults of liberal German physical anthropology, as well as its strengths. In 1889, Virchow noted in a presidential speech that, since its institutionalization, physical anthropology had retrogressed.³⁹ It had based itself too much on anthropometry, busied itself too much at organizing conflicting classifications of craniometric human "types," most famously according to the cephalic index. In 1891, the leading Hungarian anthropologist, Aurel von Török, suggested that craniometry would "degenerate into the wizardry of deceptive fortune-telling by skulls," because it was based on a misleading assumption that the arithmetic mean revealed a natural type.⁴⁰ He produced convincing evidence that, on the one hand, the most primitive "virgin" tribes showed considerable skull variation, while, on the other hand, known crossbred "races" seemed to have a "pure" type. This devastating critique was greeted skeptically by the older generation of anthropologists, who had invested much of their careers in anthropometry. The resulting feud weakened the authority of the society. Boas was, much later, to receive similar criticism for his own work.

The Anthropologist

Boas spent just about a year among the Eskimos of Baffin Island. His appreciation of them was typically romantic, as seen in his descriptions of their "beautiful" customs: "I often ask myself what advantages our 'good society' possesses over that of the 'savages' and find, the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down upon them."⁴¹ He saw "psychic unity" everywhere, in that quality he called *Herzenbildung* (inner character): "The evil as well as the value of a person lies in *Herzenbildung*, which I find or find lacking here just as much as among us."⁴² He was more of an observer than a participant. He wrote of himself: "I am now a true Eskimo. I live as they do, hunt with them, and belong to the men of Anarnitung."⁴³ He was, however, referring only to superficial activities that he had learned, particularly hunting, not to any deep sense of belonging. He did not even make friends among the "men of Anarnitung," and often wrote, in his letters to Marie, of his loneliness. Weike, his countryman, proved a less than stimulating companion.

The expedition's first base was Kekerten Island, from which Boas embarked on mapping excursions until he could find enough Eskimos to hire for a boat crew. His principal aid at the time was Signa, a fifty-year-old Eskimo originally from Davis Strait, whose help he secured by the gift of a Mauser rifle, bread and tobacco. Additionally, he received help from the whaler James Mutch, in whose quarters he lived. After numerous

³⁹ Massin, p. 106

⁴⁰ Massin, p. 109

⁴¹ Cole, p. 79

⁴² Cole, p. 79

⁴³ Cole, p. 78

tries at a longer excursion, frustrated by bad weather and bad seal hunting, he finally purchased ten sled dogs and prepared for a much abbreviated version of his original planned expedition. His first major sled trip nearly ended in disaster. Due to fresh snow, Boas, Weike, and Signa missed a supply sled from Kekerten and were soon in dire straits. They headed for Anarnitung, but went for miles in the wrong direction. Finally, after 26 hours of marching in the snow, they reached Anarnitung hungry and frostbitten. The last excursion was to Davis Strait, and from there to Siorartijung, at the tip of Cape Henry Kater. It was a miserable journey, featuring heavy fog, snow blindness, a horrible toothache, sleeping on their sleds, and days without food.

At the time, a spell of diphtheria spread across Cumberland Sound, and Boas did his best to treat the dying Eskimos. Unfortunately, the Eskimos associated him with the disease, and Boas found himself at odds with the *angakuk*, or shaman, at Imigen. Because Boas was dependant on help from the Eskimos, and he knew that the Eskimos depended on him for supplies, Boas presented the *angakuk* with an ultimatum: either the *angakuk* would invite Boas to his hut, a sign of trust, or Boas would leave, taking the supplies with him. Boas, or rather his position of power, won, and the *angakuk*, named Napekin, became a useful assistant for his work.

Boas managed to cover very little of what he had hoped. Nevertheless, he arrived at New York a changed man, having been away from Europe for the first time, after overcoming near-death experiences, loneliness, and an appreciation of the difficulties and joys of savage life. Though he retained his interest in geography, he acknowledged the greater urgency of ethnography, because “savages,” to use the contemporary term, were becoming quickly assimilated into European languages and customs.⁴⁴

More difficult than the choice to change the direction of his career, from physics to geography, was his choice to stay in America. There were many good reasons to stay. First, there was little chance of getting a professorship in Germany at the time, and much less chance of working in the public sphere, which was becoming more and more attractive to him. More importantly, he detested the political climate, which abandoned liberalism and constitutional principles, while anti-Semitism was on the rise. In America, the opportunities were endless. Boas wanted nothing less than to establish geographical science there.⁴⁵ His family was less sympathetic, and worried that he was throwing his future away for the sake of an early marriage. Because nobody would hire him in America at the time, and perhaps due to his mediocre English, he decided to give Germany a second chance.

It was a very warm welcome home. Fischer, who strongly suggested that Boas stay in Germany, arranged for him to present his paper on Baffin Island to the geographical congress in Hamburg. It was received with lively applause, so unlike his dismal failure at the Columbia College in New York, where, of his two lectures, few bothered to come to the second.⁴⁶ Jobs, however, were not being offered, and politics were even starker than when he had left, with humaneness and idealism, those precious values instilled in him by his mother and Toni, completely replaced with talk of German nationalism and “practicality.” Even Fischer was laboring for colonial causes and for a

⁴⁴ Cole, p. 81

⁴⁵ Cole, p. 85

⁴⁶ Cole, p. 86

national union of the Burschenschaften.⁴⁷ Using a word he picked up from Marie, Boas wrote that he had the “blues.”⁴⁸

There were still no jobs in America, and so Boas settled on habilitation at the University of Berlin. Habilitation turned out to be an excruciating process, as Boas had to spend a year writing his thesis, to satisfy Heinrich Kiepert, who was intent on not being satisfied. Kiepert was the only geographer at Berlin, and was stubborn and dry, strictly a physical geographer, with low regard for the new historical geography, and probably wary of the new, young competitor. Though Kiepert tried to block his entry, eventually, through the help of Kirchhoff and Bastian, Boas successfully defended his habilitation thesis, *Baffin-land*, before a highly distinguished colloquium of thirty professors, including Dilthey and Helmholtz. The pay for his position was low, however, and Boas worked in the meantime as an assistant in Bastian’s museum. It was exciting work, and Boas made friends among the young anthropologists that Bastian employed and trained. It was there that he became interested in the Indians of British Columbia, as his job was to catalog a collection of their artifacts brought in by J. Adrian Jacobsen. He was struck by “the wealth of thought... hidden behind the grotesque masks and elaborately decorated utensils of these tribes.”⁴⁹ Even more exciting was the troupe of Bella Coola Indians that Jacobsen brought with him. Boas spent his free time studying their dances and language. Their fascination was partly due to their not being Eskimos. He desperately wanted to move beyond his “eternal Eskimo,”⁵⁰ as the long struggle to write his book, much of which he tried to accomplish in his inadequate English, left him spent, and bored. Boas wrote an article about the Bella Coola troupe for the *American Science* journal, and kept his fingers crossed, hoping for a new challenge.

He decided to tour London and America before his lectures at Berlin were to begin, to look for better opportunities. He didn’t find jobs, but he managed to secure research work in the Pacific Northwest, with the aid of a loan from his uncle, Jacobi. And so, he canceled his lectures and left for the town of Victoria in British Columbia. Quickly, though, he was overwhelmed by the complexity of life there, the sheer number of entirely different languages he would have to learn. In town, he met speakers of Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl and Salish. To acquire some artifacts in order to pay back his loan, he traveled north to a Kwakiutl village where some feasts were being organized. His primary organizational criterion was mythology, and so most of his work involved collecting stories. It was frustrating work, as his informants were not very talkative, for various reasons. One Comox woman even tried to invent a story to please him.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Boas was relatively successful, due to the effort he made to follow local custom. Arranging his own potlatch won him much respect. He returned to New York with many rare artifacts, and three hundred edited pages of myths and stories, vocabulary and grammar tables. He also discovered a new Salish language, Petlatch. He hoped to use this collection to get a job as a museum curator, but none in New York seemed especially interested in anthropology exhibits. And then, his luck changed. *Science* magazine offered him a job as its Berlin correspondent, but Boas was wary of

⁴⁷ Cole, p. 87

⁴⁸ Cole, p. 88

⁴⁹ Cole, p. 97

⁵⁰ Cole, p. 97

⁵¹ Cole, p. 101

going back, as there was danger of war starting in the Balkans, for which he would have to return to the military. The magazine changed its offer to assistant editor in charge of geography. At long last, Boas was in America to stay, and, with a steady job, could finally marry.

The article that landed him the job at *Science* in 1887 was *The Study of Geography*. There, Boas was struggling with that old tension between the physicist and cosmographer, writing passionately about the joy one could find in the latter. Between the lines, one could almost read a jab at old Kiepert. It was not, however, simply a matter of abandoning one persuasion in favor of the other. For Boas, quite originally, these were two approaches that could be applied to the same subject matter. This was an important departure from Dilthey's notion of two domains that complemented each other, but did not overlap, and more like the approaches of Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, who were formulating a more sophisticated philosophical account of this overlap.⁵² Dilthey was thinking of relationships like those between, for example, Newton, who formulated laws of motion, and Kant, who used those laws to speculate on the motions of specific planets. Boas, coming out of German academia informed by Dilthey, probably did not expect to find overlap. His education, though, prepared him well for appreciating it. This appreciation, as we shall see, carried on to his discovery of culture.

Boas was confident enough in his approach that he used his position in *Science* to enter into what would seem, at first, a petty argument with Otis T. Mason, curator of the National Museum. Mason had organized his Northwestern collection according to types of artifacts. For example, a mask exhibit would display masks belonging to various tribes. Boas, who did much research in the museum, found the organization misleading and difficult to work with. The organization was based on the assumption that "like causes lead to like effects," meaning that all tribes made masks for more or less the same reasons, and that the masks had more or less the same use. Boas carefully dissected this assumption, and revealed its logical and factual flaws. Like effects did not necessarily imply like causes. The alternative organization would be vertical, with exhibits organized around tribes, so that the meaning of artifacts could be seen in relation to a whole. Soon, Boas would begin to refer to this whole as "a culture," though with no intent to create a new concept. Boas was never fond of neologisms.⁵³

The argument established Boas as something of a maverick in America, but a closer look at his personal correspondence reveals a self-conscious, even nervous man, awed by the famous professionals in his field, and careful never to offend or overreach. For example, he omitted a phrase that could show dissatisfaction with evolutionary ethnology from a letter to Tylor.⁵⁴ Gently, then, within the rules of formal conduct, at least the rules he was accustomed to in Germany, he delivered fatal blows to his opponents. One could make an analogy to his dueling days as a student, but most likely his manner was inspired by Virchow's example of unflinching adherence to science, especially in the public sphere.

Just as Marie became pregnant for the first time, the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), chaired by E. B. Tylor in Oxford, asked Boas to go on an expedition to British Columbia, under the supervision of the elderly Horatio Hale, in

⁵² Cole, pp. 123-4

⁵³ Cole, p. 274

⁵⁴ Stocking 1968, p. 208

order to draft a detailed ethnological map, which would also include “racial peculiarities.” It was to be a somewhat hasty survey, because Boas was eager to return home to his wife, but it was also to be his first attempt at serious anthropometry. Careful not to alienate his friends by measuring them, he used the seven Indians at Victoria’s jailhouse, with the mayor’s consent, and dug up skeletons, a task he found dreadful. Ethnologically, the expedition was too short and unsatisfying. He returned to find that *Science* would not be able to afford to hire him for much longer, and so wrote to Tylor, with Hale’s support, asking to fund another, longer, three year expedition, to document the Indians before they would assimilate into White society. *Science* agreed to purchase articles of the expedition, and with the addition of other temporary contracts, Boas was set, for a while.

Before leaving, Boas traveled to Germany and then to London, hoping that Tylor would unleash him from Hale’s supervision, only to return to New York to find that Hale had infuriatingly expanded the expedition plan into another survey. Hale did not appreciate Boas’ tactics, rebuked him, and then changed the plan again. Furious, Boas redid much of his preparation work. This was not the first or last time that he was to clash with his supervisors.

In 1889, Boas moved to Worcester, to start teaching at the new Clark University, as part of a founding “dream team” of outstanding scholars recruited from established institutions in the United States. He and Marie quickly became good friends of the neurologist Henry Donaldson and his wife. After a third expedition commissioned by the BAAS to British Columbia, Boas returned to find he had his first two students. One of them, A. F. Chamberlain, was to become the first Ph.D. in anthropology in America. Because Boas was expected to teach physical anthropology, he soon organized a project to research the connection between the body measurements and mental capacities of schoolchildren in Worcester. It proved explosive. A local newspaper, hostile to the establishment of the university in the town, blasted the project and Boas personally. The university’s president, torn between loyalty to the faculty and loyalty to his source of funding, accused Boas of acting independently, and refused to fund the project. This alienated Boas and many of his colleagues. And so, in 1892, two thirds of the faculty left, taking most of the students with them.⁵⁵

Boas went on two more short BAAS expeditions, this time with Hale giving him full autonomy. They turned out to be very productive, focused on linguistics, mostly due to necessity. He felt compelled to document disappearing Chinook languages, and also to collect many stories, mostly from one old informant, who he was afraid would take the precious knowledge to his grave. This material was complete enough for him to prepare it for presentation in the upcoming World Fair in Chicago, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus, to which he had been invited by Frederic Ward Putnam, the senior New World archaeologist and director of the Peabody Museum at Harvard. For the ethnological display at the fair, Boas used the Kwakiutl to represent the Northwest. George Hunt, his informant among the Kwakiutl, did much of the collection, and arranged for a troupe of Kwakiutl, fifteen adults and two children.

Overall, the World Fair exhibit was not very successful, due to its marginalization by the fair organizers. Putnam seemed to have a lot of enemies,⁵⁶ and Boas inherited

⁵⁵ Cole, pp. 145-6

⁵⁶ Cole, pp. 155-6

them through his connection to him. With Putnam's support, Boas was hired to organize the Fair material into a museum for the University of Chicago, but quickly found himself enmeshed in the politics of the museum.⁵⁷ The government Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), to thwart Putnam, wanted its own man, the distinguished W. H. Holmes, to take Boas' place, or at least be his supervisor. Boas was unwilling to compromise, and left feeling bitter and betrayed. His accomplishments put him in the cutting edge of his field, ahead of most of his American colleagues, and yet he could not find work. Moreover, he was in grief, and in serious financial need. His third child, the baby Hedwig, had just died of an illness, and the doctor bills and burial costs were considerable. It was a low point in his life, and the lowest point in his career.

After all opportunities at Chicago were exhausted, Boas returned to Lake George in New York, where Marie's family lived, to finish up his report for Putnam and do some of his own work, including preparation of an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), where he was ending his service as vice-president of the anthropological section.

That address, *Human Faculty as Determined by Race*, delivered in 1894, was Boas' manifesto on relativity. Seventeen years later he was to repeat it almost word for word in *The Mind of Primitive Man*. His thesis was that mental differences between races could be traced, on the one hand, to differences in cultural traditions, and, on the other hand, to flawed academic traditions of the scientists observing these differences.⁵⁸ In other words, their own assumptions were being echoed back to them. He credited his appreciation of primitive mentality to his experience among the Kwakiutl. The sheer mental effort, "without mnemonic aids," required for organizing a potlatch convinced him that these people were very intelligent.⁵⁹ This was a strong statement from a man who himself spent decades in sheer mental effort, a graduate of one the most challenging education systems in the world.

After the address, Boas went on another BAAS expedition, despite Marie's objection, to earn some more money, and also to fill in gaps left over from his previous research. The expedition included a three-week stay among the Kwakiutl of Fort Rupert, the most intensive ethnographical fieldwork study of his career. There, with the great help of George Hunt, Boas came to understand the scope of the potlatch institution. Hunt, however, often proved unreliable, in that he had agendas of his own, which he never revealed to Boas, and which Boas interpreted as "laziness."⁶⁰ Boas returned home through California, hoping to make connections at Stanford and the University of California. The future weighed heavily on him, and Hedwig's death was still on his mind. In a letter to Marie he said that it was the second time he had "looked into hell," the first being his near-death experience on Baffin Island.⁶¹ He returned home, though, happy and with renewed appreciation for Marie and his children. After a trip to Germany, mostly to visit his family, Boas finally found a job. Putnam managed, through much political maneuvering, to become part-time curator of the American Museum of Natural History in

⁵⁷ Cole, p. 161

⁵⁸ Stocking, p. 215

⁵⁹ Stocking, p. 219

⁶⁰ Cole, p. 171

⁶¹ Cole, p. 172

New York, and to appoint Boas as his full-time assistant in charge of the ethnographical section.

Boas' next expedition was much more ambitious. He suggested to Morris Jesup, president of the museum, that it was important to document natives of the Pacific coasts of America and Asia before they disappeared. The ambitious hope was to compare their race and customs and find a historical connection. The intercontinental scope of the project, which would require the cooperation of specialists from all over the world, excited Jesup and enlisted his full support. The Jesup Expedition, under Boas' leadership, would be the ultimate test of the comparative historical approach, which Boas outlined in *The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology*. For the first time, and to his relief, Boas had professional collaborators in his fieldwork, the archaeologist Harlan Smith and the psychologist Livingston Farrand. They handled the next two seasons of work in the West Coast without him. Meanwhile, Boas organized the enormous project, which involved finding reliable researchers and negotiating with local authorities. Particularly frustrating was the refusal of the Russian interior ministry to allow the German Berthold Laufer entry into Siberia, because he was Jewish.⁶² In his stead, Boas recruited two Russian scientists. For the fourth year of the expedition, 1900, Boas returned to the Kwakiutl. This time, he managed to train George Hunt well enough to trust him to do paid research on his behalf. By then, to Marie's relief, Boas was too busy to go on fieldwork. He was founding the first department of anthropology in America, at Columbia College.

⁶² Cole, pp. 195-6

The Kwakiutl

It may be surprising that, despite his passion for historical particulars, Boas had, at first, only a superficial interest in the contemporary history of the peoples he studied. Their history, for him, was a matter of migrations, of diffusion of customs, of linguistic change. It was as if all they were doing in modern times was disappearing. In fact, the Kwakiutl were undergoing profound changes.

In 1792, Vancouver landed at the island named after him. The people of the Pacific Northwest coast had already been trading with Europeans for three decades, and the Kwakiutl in particular greeted him courteously. It may be that they were spared much of the violence perpetrated by the maritime traders.⁶³ The area was fabulously rich in food and natural resources, and the people living there were skilled and productive in extracting vast surplus. To the Europeans, these Indians were “industrious.” What seemed at first familiar, however, came to be seen as alien: the Indians did accumulate wealth, but only to give it away or, worse, to destroy it.

While the potlatch occurred throughout the Pacific Northwest coast, the Kwakiutl potlatch was unique. Plenty of useful material items changed hands, but people were more interested in the exchange of social status: of names, songs, and ritual objects. Their historian, Helen Codere, defined it as “the ostentatious and dramatic distribution of property by the holder of a fixed, ranked and named social position.”⁶⁴ According to Margaret Mead, a student of Boas, “the Kwakiutl in the midst of plenty build their... fierce competition on an artificially constructed scarcity of titles and prerogatives.”⁶⁵ Boas compared it to life insurance, in that gifts would return to the inheritor of one’s status after death.⁶⁶ Codere added a comparison to investment, pointing out a system of “interest rates” which we would find excessive: for “gifts”, that were not to be refused, twice as much could be expected in return within a year.⁶⁷ The system avoided collapse by destruction. The “pinnacle of ambition” was destroying “coppers,” beaten sheets of metal that functioned as high-denomination bank notes.⁶⁸

The founding of Fort Rupert in 1849 marked the beginning of a potlatching crescendo, as the increase of wealth due to trade with and employment by the whites was “invested” in potlatching. The kind of wealth also changed: slaves stopped being given, and woolen blankets replaced locally made fur, otter and cedar bark blankets.⁶⁹ The deeper consequence was that potlatching eventually replaced the role warfare played as an institution of solidarity.

Kwakiutl warfare was a dramatic, ritual affair. War parties of 30-50 men would leave on canoes during the August-October fighting season, to assuage grief and shame, take revenge, or “acquire the prestige of being considered utterly terrifying.”⁷⁰ The killer would acquire the social positions of his victims, by appropriating their names, songs,

⁶³ Codere 1950, p. 113

⁶⁴ Codere, p. 63

⁶⁵ Mead, 1937: 466, in Codere, p. 68

⁶⁶ Boas, Victoria Province, Feb. 11, 1897, in Codere, p. 69

⁶⁷ Codere, p. 69

⁶⁸ Boas, 1897: 342-54, in Codere, p. 75

⁶⁹ Codere, p. 95

⁷⁰ Codere, p. 99

dances, and other customs. These were appropriated, by association, for all of the killer's kin, and put on display during the Winter Dance. It was thus, by appropriation, that the Kwakiutl added cannibalistic rituals to their Winter Dances, which so shocked the Europeans.⁷¹ Few instances of war occurred since the founding of Fort Rupert, and these usually ended with Hudson's Bay Company gunboats shelling a village. The last recorded instance of war was in 1865, when Kwakiutl attacked the Sanetch. The last Winter Dance was held in 1896.⁷²

As war became more difficult and potlatching easier, Kwakiutl society changed dramatically. The fervor and imagery that used to be given to warfare was applied to potlatching. Coppers became "forts" and in their destruction they were "lying dead in the water off our beach,"⁷³ signifying a metaphoric military victory over the rival. In their own words, the Kwakiutl began "fighting with property". During a Winter Dance in Fort Rupert in 1895, their statements, and those of their rivals, were euphoric:

We are the Koskimo, who have never been vanquished by any tribe, neither in wars of blood nor in wars of property... Of olden times the Kwakiutl ill treated my forefathers and fought them so that the blood ran over the ground. Now we fight with button blankets and other kinds of property, smiling at each other. Oh, how good is the new time!⁷⁴

The good times, however, could not last long, as the Kwakiutl would soon find themselves in the midst of economic and legal changes over which they had little control.

In 1867, the Indian Liquor Ordinance became law, and in 1876, the Indian Act went further to prohibit potlatching and Winter Dances, but the effect on the Kwakiutl, at first, was minimal. The government agent had very limited resources, with only the Kwakiutl of Alert Bay being under any kind of supervision⁷⁵. Nevertheless, as shown in the language of these laws, the stage was set for a new kind of relationship:

Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating or encourages either directly or indirectly another to celebrate any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony of which the giving away or paying or giving back of money, goods or articles of any sort forms a part or is a feature, whether such gift of money, goods, articles takes place before, at or after the celebration of the same, or who encourages or assists in any celebration or dance of which the wounding or mutilation of the dead or living body of any human being or animal forms a part or is a feature, is guilty of an offense and is liable on summary conviction for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months.⁷⁶

While explicitly addressing the usual elements of savage behavior, there was a deeper, social critique. By prohibiting these "celebrations," the law acknowledged their importance for social cohesion, which the Act deliberately tried to destroy. The act of giving "gifts" was not, in itself, attacked. Indeed, referring to potlatch exchanges as "gifts" put them on known, cherished grounds. In just one paragraph of legalize, Indians

⁷¹ Codere, p. 112

⁷² Codere, p. 117

⁷³ Boas, 1897: 589-90, Codere, p. 120

⁷⁴ Boas, 1897: 580-1, in Codere, p. 118

⁷⁵ Codere 1961, p. 462

⁷⁶ Revised Statutes of Canada, 1927, vol. II, chap. 98, no. 140, p. 2219, in Codere, p. 87

were depicted as both cruel and innocent savages. The response of the Kwakiutl, as shown below, sidestepped the ideological conflict. Whatever they thought of the ways of Whites, they saw the situation first and foremost as a conflict of power. When first coming into their villages, Boas was confronted by a council of chiefs, one of whom said:

We want to know whether you have come to stop our dances and our feasts, as the missionaries and agents who live among our neighbors try to do. We do not want to have anybody here who will interfere with our customs... We are told that it is the Queen's land; but no! it is mine! ... Do we ask the white man, "Do as the Indian does?" No, we do not. Why then do you ask us, "Do as the white man does?" It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbors. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law, and we shall observe ours.⁷⁷

While this chief validated the Act by emphasizing the importance of potlatching, his response mainly addressed the authority of the Act itself. These were, then, the new terms: Canada assumed authority and worked towards assimilation of its Indians while, on their end, the Kwakiutl were fully aware of this assault, and responded to it directly, sometimes successfully.

In 1881, the first school for Kwakiutl was founded in the mission house, and the tensions began to play out.⁷⁸ The chief Charles James Nowell was one of the first Kwakiutl to attend school. In his autobiography, he recounted his experience at age six or seven (during 1887). To attend the school, he moved in with his grandfather, a chief who lived at Alert Bay. After swearing at his teacher, Mrs. Hall, her husband, the missionary, punished Charley by beating him with a cane. Furious, Charley's grandfather took him out of the school. Mr. Hall arrived a week later at their house, together with the Indian agent.

Mr. Hall tried to explain to my grandfather that a teacher should teach children to obey and go by the rules of the school, and that if they don't children have to be punished. My grandfather says, "I have never punished any of my children before I warned them and talked to them." Finally, they promised not to thrash me unless I do something very serious. They kept that promise.⁷⁹

In other contexts, this would not be an extraordinary response. However, this grandfather was a chief, and the missionary and the Indian agent, powerful yet limited, could not enforce their rules. In this particular clash of authorities, both won in the short term. Charley returned to school, eventually built a European-style house, and found work as a wage-laborer. In the long run, the "civilization project" succeeded. Nevertheless, it was a unique Kwakiutl form of civilization. Charley married in the Kwakiutl fashion, and maintained relations with his kin. Potlatches continued throughout his life.

From warfare, to potlatching, to missions, to schools, the Kwakiutl had managed to remain Kwakiutl after more than a century of transformation. Meanings, values and priorities had changed, but new constructions were built upon the readily available, rich cultural materials. It would be fifty years until much of this history could be constructed,

⁷⁷ Boas, 1896: 232, in Codere, p. 89

⁷⁸ Codere, p. 263

⁷⁹ Ford 1941, p. 93

partly by Boas himself, but, until then, Boas saw Indians primarily as victims overwhelmed by greater forces. This was, no doubt, true, but Boas did not acknowledge their ability to survive *on their own terms*. He would make the same assumptions, later, for American “Negroes,” to use the contemporary term, who chafed under the conditions of slavery. He would not, however, extend this analogy to Jews. Somehow, in Boas’ mind, Jews managed to flourish in conditions where Indians and Negroes could not. Accepting this difference as fact, Boas’ challenge was even greater. How could he show that Indians and Negroes were not, in fact, deficient?

The Primitive Mind

During the first decade of the 20th century, Boas went to great lengths to offer alternative, plausible explanations for what some, including Boas, identified as the mental deficiencies of the primitive mind. Together, they represented an appreciation of what George Stocking Jr., who studied Boas' work, called the "tyranny of custom." The mechanism was vaguely described as a process by which folklore became more and more unconscious due to repetition. Primitive mentality was narrow because it was so fiercely religious. Deviance was dealt with as with taboo: primitives considered it deeply, morally intolerable. As for where folklore came from in the first place, Boas did not dismiss Tylor's and Spencer's theory that it was a conscious creation of a flawed mind, but was inclined to see it, too, as originating in the unconscious, out of the "general conditions of life." This was, obviously to him, true of language, and so could be equally true of "fundamental religious notions."⁸⁰ These "notions" seem identical to Bastian's *Elementargedanken*. Thus, through Boas' reinterpretation, Bachofen's 19th century insistence on the independence and innate power of elemental ideas was brought into the Freudian 20th century. Boas did not develop this idea further, but his location of culture within the unconscious would prove a fruitful beginning for 20th century literary and cultural criticism.

Folklore, then, was the most important object of Boas' anthropological inquiry, but in a very different sense from Tylor's. Tylor treated folklore as an irrational survival of a rational narrative, and thus worthy of study only for historical reconstruction. For Boas, it was much more. Folklore was both conscious and unconscious; it penetrated our skin, colored our vision, and dictated our ethics. Consciously, our creativity was revealed in what we accomplished with the culture given to us. It may sound almost as if Boas were talking about the burdens of an academic career, in which it is necessary to accept the "folklore" of academia in order to be part of it, and yet it is also necessary to criticize it creatively in order to progress. Indeed, he extended the analogy to all "civilized communities:" art, politics, religion, and even to science. Though he was not talking about the "psychic unity of humanity" in Waitz's sense, and he seemed to have doubts that such a thing existed, he did find in the idea of folklore a basis for mutual sympathy between a Kwakiutl tribesman from British Columbia and a Jewish student of physics from Westphalia.

Though the Mason debate was formative, it was not definitive. Boas was on to something there, but had not yet brought it into contemporary anthropological discourse, which was dominated by Tylor, who was often credited with introducing the modern anthropological use of "culture:"

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.⁸¹

This textbook definition sounds modern, but, in Tylor's usage, it was mostly identical to that of 18th century humanists. For most of his contemporaries, "Civilization" was a complete package. Either you had it, which made you civilized, or you did not, and thus

⁸⁰ Stocking, p. 221

⁸¹ Stocking, p. 73

were a savage. The 1860s were a time of much anthropological theorizing, with polygenists like James Hunt and John Crawfurd, presidents of two competing English anthropological societies, effectively delaying England's conversion to monogenic Darwinism, and degenerationists like Richard Whately, Archbishop of Dublin, who argued that savages could never regain their lost Culture without help.⁸² In this climate of much heated debate, Tylor went to great pains to argue that Civilization was a matter of degree, not of type. He measured it on a ruler of progress, with "savagery" at the bottom, and "barbarism" somewhere in the middle. For Tylor, Culture, not always synonymous with Civilization, was the content, what was to be developed in order to move up the ruler. In this light, one can appreciate how provocative the name of his 1871 publication was. To many of his contemporaries, *Primitive Culture* was a contradiction in terms.

In his earlier work of 1865, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, Tylor devoted much attention to debunking the polygenists and degenerationists, and arguing for evolutionism. He did not, however, emphasize independent human invention. Culture was diffused and inherited, but not often created. This assumption suited him in arguing with Whately, because it allowed more common ground between the two opposite monogenic theories, allowing Tylor to focus more on the particulars of diffusion, demonstrating that accumulation of Culture, and thus progress, was far more common than degeneration. The response of the opposition was that such scientific arguments might hold for progress in material life, but not for spiritual life. And so, Tylor wrote *Primitive Culture* to argue that science could demonstrate spiritual progress as well as any other kind. It was thus devoted mostly to religion. Here, too, he emphasized diffusion, famously writing that "Civilization is a plant much oftener propagated than developed."⁸³ Nevertheless, it was harder to show how religion, as an integrated realm of ideas, could progress by diffusion alone. Some parts of Culture had to be original and self-contained. The bulk of his work was thus unthreading the component processes of Civilization into categories such as bows and arrows or myths of sunrise and sunset, which could then be carefully compared and traced historically. All this to support a historical theory, but it had an effect, of course, on how one would see contemporary life. "Just as the catalogue of all the species of plants and animals of a district represents its Flora and Fauna, so the list of all the items of the general life of a people represents that whole which we call its culture."⁸⁴ This was not, however, Tylor's primary concern at the time. He continued to see Culture as a process, an average total of rates of progress in different categories. This emphasis was, again, a response to another debate, this time with the Social Darwinists. They were using a similar sense of amalgam, notably Walter Bagehot's "cake of custom." For Bagehot, however, the "cake" became almost a material thing, to be handed down to one's children with little change.⁸⁵ In Tylor's usage, Culture could never be so pinned down, and so it must have seemed necessary to him to emphasize its lack of integration.

Boas' battles were different from Tylor's, and so his solution was quite contrary. He did pin down "Culture" by turning it into "culture," un-capitalized. As for Tylor,

⁸² Stocking, p. 75

⁸³ Stocking, p. 79

⁸⁴ Stocking, pp. 80-1

⁸⁵ Stocking, pp. 82-3

Boas' innovation was a response to the current climate of debate, but it may have been mostly unconscious, even a mistake, or a mistranslation. George Stocking Jr. wrote:

In all my reading of Tylor, I have noticed no instance in which the word *culture* appears in the plural. In extended researches into American social science between 1890 and 1915, I found no instances of the plural form in writers other than Boas prior to 1895... The plural appears with regularity only in the first generation of Boas' students around 1910."⁸⁶

That plurality may have been there for Boas all along. To Boas, Tylor's usage must have been closer to the German *Bildung*, which can be translated as cultivation, education and foundation, perhaps even the *Herzenbildung* he identified in the Anarnitung of Baffin Island. *Bildung* was what one hoped to achieve for oneself in the German Gymnasium, and for one's nation by unifying Germany. Like Tylor's "Civilization," it contained an idea of process, cultivation, progress, without implying, necessarily, a normative ending point. Boas certainly did use the English term "culture" in this manner, but also in a new way. When Boas was saying "a culture," implicitly un-capitalized, he was likely transposing the German *Kultur*, in the sense of *Kulturvölker* as opposed to *Naturvölker*, invoking Bastian's *Völkergedanken*, Lazarus and Steinthal's "folk soul," and Humboldt's *Nationalcharakter*. He was referring quite casually, considering his intellectual background, to the Herderian *Volksgeist*, that genius inseparable from what we can call, just as casually, a people. The plurality of cultures was then definitively dependent upon the plurality of peoples. It was because Tylor made the term "culture" so central to anthropology that Boas' injection of the Herderian tradition into it would be such an innovation. Because "Culture" was not an abstract term, but a concrete, if ambiguous, methodological category applied in fieldwork and museum arrangement, a new understanding of what it could be announced nothing less than a new understanding of human history and contemporary human society.

⁸⁶ Stocking, p. 203

Into the Public Sphere

By the time the war broke out, Boas was the leader of American anthropology. His model was Virchow's crusade for science, through adamant professionalism and politics. It is tempting to associate this professional confidence with a theoretical one, but Boas' passion, even in *Human Faculty as Determined by Race*, was to science itself, not so much to a specific theory. There was never a grand "Boasian school," as Boas would probably have insisted. Nevertheless, Boas was confident in his *facts*, confident enough that he did not always do the science required to prove them, so that later much of his work failed to survive criticism. His commitment to science, however, served him well in the public sphere, where he dueled with racist and nativist ideologues that were enjoying the aura of science without actually practicing it.

His first move, on a national scale, was to lead the founding of the new national anthropological society. Though Boas led it, W. J. McGee, chair of the Anthropological Society of Washington, actually founded the American Anthropological Association in 1902 behind Boas' back, and attached the *American Anthropologist* journal to it, which was in financial trouble under the ownership of the Washington society.⁸⁷ McGee was an amateur anthropologist, and was worried of the trend towards professionalizing anthropology, and so tried in the AAA's constitution to allow more freedom for local societies. This was precisely what Boas was afraid of, and so, instead of working through the AAA, Boas focused on making Columbia into America's professional center.

The conflict with McGee did not lead to animosity, and Boas later recommended him as chair of the BAE after John Wesley Powell's death. His recommendation was disregarded, as S. P. Langley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, saw Powell's death as an opportunity to incorporate the BAE into the Smithsonian. Boas regarded such a move, rightfully, as a blow to his anthropology, because the government was not interested in funding research on contemporary Indians, immigrant populations, and race intermixture. Again, Boas was forced to work by himself. Washington anthropology continued to decline, and soon Columbia, and Boas, would be the moving force in American anthropology.

Boas assumed leadership. He felt that he now had the backing to use science to confront the problems of his age. At the time, science was used to justify oppression of "Negroes." Daniel G. Brinton from the University of Pennsylvania, Nathaniel Southgate Shaler from Harvard, and statistician Frederick L. Hoffman all held that Negroes were inherently inferior to Whites. Many scientists predicted the eventual disappearance of the Negro, or warned against the weakening of White stock by intermixture.⁸⁸ Boas had answers for all of them. In 1904, *What the Negro Has Done in Africa* laid out his main argument. He claimed that Negro performance was inferior because of the conditions of slavery, and compared "the achievements of the African tribes with those of the tribes of the New World, and even with those of the tribes of northern Europe at a period they had come under the influence of Mediterranean culture."⁸⁹ The comparison debunked any notion of inherent inferiority. On the contrary, Africans proved just as capable, if not more so: "No other race on a similar level of culture has developed as strict methods of

⁸⁷ Hyatt 1990, p. 53

⁸⁸ Hyatt, p. 84

⁸⁹ Hyatt, p. 87

legal procedure as the negro has.”⁹⁰ We must note that Boas did not deny that Negroes were statistically inferior, but did claim that this inferiority had no consequence as to their potential for culture, in his sense of it. Nevertheless, Boas publicly attacked racism, relying on the full weight of his career, and to the benefit of his career. Other scientists, mostly sociologists, followed his example. It is difficult to evaluate Boas’ contribution to the Civil Rights movement on the whole, though W. E. B. Du Bois gave him much credit.⁹¹ It is quite clear, though, that Boas led a change in American academia.

He held similar sway in the battle against nativism. In 1907, a congressional committee chaired by Vermont senator William P. Dillingham was established to investigate the immigrant question, and Boas proposed a large-scale anthropological study. The results were published in 1911, as *Changes in the Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants*. It was a triumph of environmental determinism. The bodies of second generation immigrants were found to be very different from their parents. Particularly, Boas showed that heads changed, approaching a unified American type. He even showed that the longer parents had been living in America before producing offspring, the greater the change. As always, Boas assumed that body form influenced mental capacity, which was why these results “proved” his theory of the plasticity of mental capacity. Whether they did or did not, scientists could no longer assume fixity of head form across generations. Boas’ findings were contrary to the rest of the Dillingham Commission, which President Theodore Roosevelt did not attach much importance to anyway, and so he did not affect policy. The findings were, however, very influential in academia, preparing it to receive Boas’ masterwork. In 1913, Boas brought all of his work together in the grand scope of *The Mind of Primitive Man*, which stuck a thick wedge between race and culture, without denying the existence of race. It came at the end of the first long chapter in Boas’ anthropological career. His former students, Edward Sapir and A. A. Goldenweiser, were beginning their own careers, and it was that year that Ruth Benedict began taking his classes, and W. J. McGee passed away. Two years later, Boas’ benefactor, Frederick Putnam, also died. It was the outbreak of war, however, that marked the most profound change.

In his vehement public opposition to American involvement in the war, Boas found himself floating in the public sphere without the wings of science. His lifelong education in radical values by his mother and Jacobi came to the fore. His science, however, became part of the political language. In a letter to his son, he wrote:

There is one lesson for all of us: one should kill false patriotism... This is true of all things, from the small to the great ones: family pride, party hatred, etc. All this originates from the fact that we always consider the little group to which we belong better than the whole world, and therefore we always want the best for it. Instead, we should do the best we can for our own group and always appreciate what other people achieve also.⁹²

This idea was found consistently in Boas’ thought, whether he was discussing Indians, Negroes, immigrants or Jews.

⁹⁰ Hyatt, p. 87

⁹¹ Hyatt, p. 99

⁹² Hyatt, p. 124

Boas' position put him in danger. His close associate and friend at Columbia, James McKean Cattell, wrote a letter to Congress protesting the unconstitutionality of military conscription, and was subsequently fired. The same thing would happen to Boas' student, Leo J. Frachtenberg. Boas was shocked and outraged at what he saw as censoring of intellectual freedom. In the 1918 off-year election, in protest, Boas voted, in protest, for the socialist party, publicly explaining his reasons.

In 1919, Boas was involved in his own scandal, related, again, to his ideals of intellectual freedom. He had published a letter in the *Nation* titled "Scientists as Spies," harshly criticizing four anthropologists, among them James Alden Mason, who pretended to do archaeological work in Mexico while actually serving the American military. To Boas, this was an "unpardonable offense,"⁹³ and he refused to regard these people as scientists. In response, Charles Walcott, chair of the BAE, by then part of the Smithsonian, stripped Boas of his position as honorary philologist, and worked to discredit Boas in other institutions. It became an opportunity for old enemies to remember past grievances. Soon, the AAA removed Boas from its governing council. Boas, of his own accord, resigned from the division of anthropology of the National Research Council.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, post-war America was becoming increasingly xenophobic, and increasingly appreciative of science that justified anti-immigration laws, such as the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act. Boas became quite virulent in his attack on it, calling it "Nordic nonsense" discriminating against individuals "not considered as representatives of the 'Nordic' type."⁹⁵ Nevertheless, he continued to carefully attack his opponents on scientific grounds. In late December 1929, Marie was killed in an automobile accident. There was, however, little time to mourn. Adolf Hitler was rising to power in Germany, and Boas crusaded against its anti-Semitism. For Boas, Hitler represented the worst destruction of intellectual freedom. Though, again, he protested American involvement in the war, he came to accept it as inevitable. Hitler managed to destroy even Franz Boas' pacifism.

On December 21, 1942, Boas held a luncheon in Columbia in honor of his colleague, the French ethnologist Paul Rivet, another anti-Nazi activist. After concluding with his usual admonitions against all forms of racial prejudice, he fell back into his chair and died.

⁹³ Hyatt, p. 131

⁹⁴ Hyatt, pp. 132-3

⁹⁵ Hyatt, p. 136

A Century of Culture

It may be an overstatement to brand the 20th century as the Century of Culture, with Boas as its harbinger, but, without doubt, since Boas, culture had figured profoundly in national and international discourse. It became the torch for new generations of anthropologists, particularly in America. However, as for Boas and Tylor, it served specific goals in specific debates.

One development was that Tylor's prescription was turned upside down. If Tylor shockingly referred to "primitive culture," it suddenly became ludicrous to associate culture with anyone who was not primitive. In this line of thought, culture was akin to ideology, a mental opiate that truly civilized people had managed to liberate themselves from. It was not, however, the same old humanist Civilization and Culture, adapted, in reverse, to the new Boasian language, but a new chapter in the story. Before, humanity was divided between *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*. Now, *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker* both referred to the primitives, while civilized people were free individuals outside of such classification. Culture and nature were not opposites, but different sides of the same retarded stage of humanity. Progress was dependent on transcending both. While the old humanists celebrated their civilization, the new liberals celebrated its demise. In one sense, the new politics were even narrower, because emancipation became more ephemeral. Before, one had only to be born, or least educated, in the West to be part of the great camaraderie of civilized people. Now, even that was not enough. Even in the West, there were those who were not yet free. Cultures, either in other nations or within immigrant communities, could be condemned as being "less free" than others.

This may seem a far shot from his 1848 roots, but it was still a thread in Boas' thought. By pinning down Tylor's culture-as-process, he risked creating a Bagehot-like "cake of custom." His student, Ruth Benedict, followed this thread the farthest. In 1934, her *Patterns of Culture* elaborated, to his approval, Boas' side of the debate with Mason about the ideal museum. It opened a new field, reminiscent of Lazarus and Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*, which in Benedict's case has been called "culture and personality." However, whereas Lazarus and Steinthal were interested in manifestations of "folk soul" within individuals, Benedict was pinning down the "folk soul" as an integrated whole. In effect, she was suggesting an alternative level of organization for Boas' ideal museum. Boas would have an exhibit per people (read: per culture), organized according to historical continuity. For example, following the hypothesis of the Jesup Expedition, he would want Pacific Northwest exhibits close to those of Siberia. Benedict would further classify them by personality type. The Kwakiutl were "typical Dionysians," and as such would be the focal point for exhibits of other, less typical Dionysians. There are traces of this kind of categorization in Boas' work. For the Chicago World Fair, for example, he picked the Kwakiutl as "typical" of the Pacific Northwest. He did not, however, specify in what sense, exactly, they were typical, and that's where Benedict took off. Boas the geographer was more interested in historical connections, but he was also interested in psychology, and found the new direction productive. Nevertheless, it was a slippery slope from there to rigid cultural determinism. An entire people could be labeled as "Dionysian" and, worse, treated as such. While Benedict did not seem to mean for it to be applied to individuals, only to cultures as a whole, this sophisticated distinction, her crucial heritage from Boas, could easily be missed. Would George Hunt appreciate being

called a “Dionysian?” Would anybody? And what would this imply for a Bureau of Indian Affairs, in charge of regulating native rights? What Greek god would be the paragon of the BIA’s culture?

Another development in the “Boasian school” was towards the so-called “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” which seemed to put Boas’ vague notions of culture’s effect on thought in concrete terms. Language, claimed the hypothesis, determined behavior, which in turn determined culture. It was Kroeber who first attributed the hypothesis to Whorf and Sapir, and, because Edward Sapir was Boas’ student, and Benjamin Lee Whorf was Sapir’s student, a direct connection could be established. In Whorf’s work, however, we see a far more moderate and reasonable hypothesis. His notion of “language” was quite broad in that it included the ideas expressed by language. Likewise, “behavior,” in his use, was of the prescribed kind, not necessarily the accomplished.⁹⁶ In other words, then, he was arguing that language, even at the smallest scale, reflected values, and vice versa. For example, we could find consistent notions about “time” and “matter” in both rituals and grammar. The hypothesis was, then, similar to Benedict’s idea of cultural integration, but without the classification, and without the derogatory implications. Whorf never implied that the systems of meaning within language integrated into a reducible type, or even that they played a significant role in human relations. Whatever language and culture prescribed, after all, could be ignored. Furthermore, that defiance itself could be part of a system of meaning. This seems to correlate well with Boas’ idea of human plasticity, which could entertain the idea of mental inferiority of certain races, while maintaining that such inferiority did not determine the capacity to create and respond to culture. Though he did not put it in biological terms, Whorf also acknowledged mental differences without jumping to conclusions about the effect of this difference on human society. Despite Kroeber’s extreme interpretation of the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” Whorf, through Sapir, seems to have preserved and elaborated on Boas’ non-deterministic relationship between culture and behavior.

Culture, in itself, was never a panacea against prejudice. On the contrary, it was used to justify the most brutal forms of bias. Shackled in the prison of a lesser culture, the cultural/natural people relied on an emancipated patron to save them from themselves. This was not, however, the only form of discourse about culture. One variation was Tylor’s definition of culture-as-process, still prominent in non-American anthropology. For those uncomfortable with the evolutionism in Tylor, another variation was the even older humanist definition of culture as “high” art, though modified and less ethnocentric, with culture representing the most refined heritage of any people. Thus, culture could be a concerto by Mozart, but also a Kwakiutl potlatch. This narrow definition could also be used in plural form, without implying an integrated, separate worldview. Different cultures were simply matters of different tastes. This simplicity, however, served its own politics. One could appreciate the best of Ethiopian and Polish food in New York City, sampling multiple cultures, or celebrate the Chinese New Year and the Ramadan in grade school, and avoid dealing with the vastly different worldviews that these cultures represented. This shallow “multiculturalism,” a product of the Progressive movement, went hand in hand with assimilationist policies. “Culture” could be reduced to quaint

⁹⁶ Leaf, pp. 304-14

regional peculiarities only if it did not carry different values with it, otherwise such excess baggage had to be removed.

Those who cared to deal with such fundamental differences, as opposed to superficial, cultural differences, resurrected the old “civilization,” and suitably pluralized it, in defiance of pluralized “culture.” Disputes in international relations could then be put in terms of different civilizations, of matters of profound principle, not of specific grievances. As we begin the 21st century, the new discourse orbits around the supposed “Clash of Civilizations.” In such an account, culture would serve as scientific evidence. One could conceive of a comparative method, sifting through cultural differences, finding traces of the profound rifts in the underlying fabric of civilization. Anthropologists and historians could work together to pinpoint the exact moment when East separated from West. The “psychic unity of humanity” has finally been shattered.

Should anthropologists who still believe in “psychic unity” despair of “culture?” Some, indeed, have. Adam Kuper, in his native South Africa, found that culture was too often used as a tool for segregation, and that anthropological theory was either incapable of combating it, due to its own weaknesses, or was directly part of the problem. His solution was to never discuss culture on its own terms, only in terms of how it related to other aspects of life.⁹⁷ This approach is reminiscent of Boas’ consideration of culture together with biology. Kuper’s approach, however useful for an anthropologist and his or her conscience, has not yet been accepted in politics, where cultural difference is still fought for as a right in itself, often with legal implications. Anthropologists refusing culture’s messy exterior cannot make it go away. Furthermore, abandoning culture entirely would be dangerous, as something else would rush in to fill the void in dealing with human difference. It would most likely be either multiculturalism or the “Clash of Civilizations,” which both seem to derive from Boas, for whom culture was always ambiguous. The ambiguity, in Boas’ fight against racism and nativism, was an advantage: culture was never *fully* pinned down. All of Boas’ inherited tensions came to play in it. First, the Humboldtian twist between universality and particularity kept Boas from creating a grand theory of culture. His project was skeptical and slow, his goal being first to construct the history, through comparative cosmography, and only then deduct “laws.” He believed that he would find similar patterns occurring all over the world, in all cultures, but did not presume to know in advance what they might mean. The other tension was between Dilthey’s *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, which for Boas overlapped. Not only was he wearing two hats, that of the physicist and that of the geographer, but he was using both approaches to look at the same things: measuring Kwakiutl heads while observing their potlatches. Both methods suggested historical relationships, but these two bodies of knowledge were not easily reconcilable. Boas used culture to fight racism, but he did not abandon race. It is thus somewhat unlike Boas, and more like Dilthey, to talk about culture without talking about race. Inadvertently, through practice and not through theory, Boas fulfilled the goals of Bastian’s ethnology, of uniting *Geisteswissenschaften* with *Naturwissenschaften*. The full implications of this achievement have yet to be fully acknowledged and explored.

This scientific ambiguity carried on to his politics. Culture was a basis for human sympathy, though not for a “psychic unity of humanity” in the Enlightenment sense of Virchow, or even in the Romantic sense that Waitz had strived for. It could, on the

⁹⁷ Kuper 1999, p. 247

contrary, prove a barrier between people as strong as that erected by language. He never even argued that population groups were equal mentally, only that such racial differences had no effect on the fundamental capacity for creating and participating in rich culture. Boas was convinced that the Kwakiutl lived a life no less sophisticated than his own, and fought ceaselessly to make this common knowledge. He was dealing, however, with a vastly unequal situation. His Kwakiutl were victims, not aggressors. How would he deal with hypothetical “fundamentalist Kwakiutl” suicide bombers? What about those aspects of culture unworthy of celebration? Boas’ ambiguity is not good enough for a world divided by class, gender, nation and, as we are now told, civilization.

In the late 20th century, the anthropologists Marshal Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere entered into a fascinating gladiatorial duel about Captain James Cook’s encounter with the native Polynesians.⁹⁸ Sahlins argued that Polynesian thought, colored by Polynesian culture, was substantially different from his own, and so he was willing to accept, as Cook did, that the Polynesians did, in fact, believe that Cook was their god Lono. For Obeyesekere, cultural difference could not be so substantial. For him, humanity was united by a common rationality, and Sahlins’ position was tantamount to accusing the Polynesian of being dimwitted and gullible. Pointing out ambiguities in the evidence, he showed, convincingly, that the Polynesians may have, in fact, been playing along with the Lono-as-Cook myth in an intricate power-play between competing tribes and the invincible, merciless colonial force. Sahlins, according to Obeyesekere’s accusation, had understood culture, crudely, as a kind of mass hypnosis.

The debate parallels that between Boas and Mason, with Boas/Sahlins arguing for difference, and Mason/Obeyesekere arguing for commonality. The commonality that Mason represented was, for Boas, unscientific, but not so different from his own. To Mason, people all over the world made masks and played music, and, whatever the causes, whatever local meanings that Boas would locate within the culture, that fact, in itself, was significant. Were he not so invested in the confrontation, Boas might have found some value in this, a basis for sympathy. Boas, however, was at the time more interested in using the comparative method to reconstruct the past, not so much the *Bildung* of the future. It was only much later that he made the political connection, and could, we may presume, have compromised with Mason, had the issue been raised again. A museum could be arranged historically, culturally, but also politically, cross-culturally. Visitors to the museum would be making their own connections anyway, based on their own prejudices. A museum itself could be seen as a microcosm of Boas’ “culture.”

As for the new debate, we may never know what the Polynesians thought of Cook. Obeyesekere’s call, appropriate or not to his assault on Sahlins, nevertheless remains pertinent to politics. Cultural difference is real, sometimes profound, but never insurmountable. People everywhere, and probably throughout history, have learned new languages and customs. Sometimes, new culture is only appropriated, unhooked from the new and reintegrated into the old. Often, however, people acquire culture with its associated worldviews, ambiguous as they may be, and appropriately change, or at least add layers to, their own values. They can do this because all culture is manmade, and thus adaptable by anyone. Cultures may be integrated, even fairly self-contained, but people rarely are. Perhaps, then, “culture,” in Boas’ sense, is no longer relevant. It may never have been completely relevant to him, as it never was, explicitly, a weapon in his battles.

⁹⁸ Sahlins 1985, Obeyesekere 1992, Sahlins 1995

More important to us than the idea of culture in itself is Boas' journey towards its discovery. A scientific anthropology, unafraid of describing difference, can, by putting difference in a comparative historical perspective, make it less a matter of mass hypnosis, and more a matter of consciously living in particular contexts. Then, instead of attacking the deficiencies of particular cultures, even our own, we could better spend our time attacking the particular conditions that lead to the persistence of such deficiencies.

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