

Dylan Anderson

Carol Pannocione

GERM-1020

7 February 2020

Franz Boas: Who he was, what he did, and why it matters

Franz Boas, to this day, is a figure in anthropology whose importance to the discipline can hardly be rivaled by any other figure. The ways in which his radical school of thought overhauled American anthropology cannot be overstated. Old ways of thinking with regards to race and culture were thrown to the wayside by Boas and his students. His life as well as his works were drenched in controversy and rivalry, partly due to his attack on the academic status quo.

1. **Biography**

When Bendix Feibes Aron Levi was made to take a surname in 1808, he took the surname Boas, after the character from the Book of Ruth (Zumwalt 2). Bendix Boas went on, then, to become a textile merchant in Lubbecke, cementing a position in the community (2). At some point, his descendants moved to Minden (3). This is where Boas' life began. Franz Uri Boas was born in Minden, a small town in the Westphalia region of Prussia on 9 July 1858 (King 14). His parents – Meier and Sophie Boas – were upper-class and highly educated Jews who ascribed to Haskalah thought (15). Haskalah was a philosophical school of Judaism concerned with the moral and cultural renewal of Judaism, especially the revival of the Hebrew language in daily usage.

Although he was an excellent student all throughout school, his teachers bemoaned the fact that he never had any firm interest (King 16). He did especially well in high school in the

classical languages, geography, and arithmetic (16). His interest soon became natural history and geography, but this would switch in college (16). He briefly attended Heidelberg University, but after his sister became sick, he had to move to Kiel to stay with her (17-18). There, he studied physics at the University of Kiel. As he wrote his dissertation, he became quite interested in a topic known as psychophysics (Zumwalt 50). Psychophysics is a field of psychology that deals with the relationship between physical stimuli and the perceptions they generate within the human mind. His interest was sparked even further with German philosopher Immanuel Kant's writings on the noumenal (physical) and phenomenal (mental) realm (King 18-19).

Shortly after finishing his dissertation, Boas went to Baffin Island on the northeastern Canadian coast to study the geography of the area and the lives of the people there (King 21). There, he lived with the Inuit natives for some time. During his stay, he became fascinated with the stark contrast of his perception of the environment and the Inuit's perception of the environment. He had expected the lives of the Inuit to be difficult, an everlasting struggle for survival. In conversations with a hunter by the name of Signa, he realized that this was not the case, and that Signa had as much a life as Boas (26). This harkened back to his interest in psychophysics, although he would altogether cease studying psychophysics and geography in favor of anthropology (Zumwalt 64).

On returning from Baffin Island, he briefly returned to Germany before ultimately moving to Kleindeutschland, Manhattan, a neighborhood made up primarily of German immigrants (King 47). During his time in the United States, he made several enemies as he drifted from job to job.

One of his first most important questions he had asked was to director of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian after coming to disagreements with his organizing of the

museum. He asked Powell, with regards to culture, “How far does an influence of the surroundings exist?” (King 54). With his arguments with Powell as well as curator Otis Mason, Boas made one of his most important conclusions: “It is my opinion that the main object of ethnological collections should be the dissemination of the fact that civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions only go so far as our civilizations.” (56). Boas articulated – and continued to articulate – the idea that cultures cannot be objectively understood in a vacuum. After jumping from state to state for various reasons – to Cleveland to give a speech, to Massachusetts to teach, and to Chicago to organize the Anthropology section at the Chicago World Fair – he eventually landed back in New York with a position as professor of anthropology at Columbia University (58, 59, 66-67, 75).

While he was at Columbia University, Boas would have the platform he was looking for to publish his most important works. The first of which was the result of a lengthy study undertaken by Boas at the request of the United States Immigration Commission in 1908, *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (King 98-99). Boas’ main purpose in this study was to investigate the effect the environment had on childhood development. The first of his ten conclusions and his most controversial states that “American-born descendants of immigrants differ in type from their foreign-born parents. The changes which occur among various European types are not all in the same direction. They develop in early childhood and persist throughout life” (Boas 530).

This conclusion was especially controversial as it went against the prevailing anthropological theory that the features of one’s body was determined by their race, and their race was genetic and impossible to change. By positing that the children of immigrants lack

some key anthropometric features their parents had, Boas dangerously challenged a scientific consensus.

Some time after the publication of *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants*, Boas published a book that he had been thinking about for at least 15 years. *The Mind of Primitive Man* was the culmination of several lectures and courses Boas had taught, beginning with a speech he gave to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, as vice-president of the Section of Anthropology (King 99). *The Mind of Primitive Man* was a 300-page dissection of race science, including eugenics and white supremacy. Boas even shared a stage with W. E. B. Du Bois, lecturing about interracial relations and economics (105).

In 1914, however, Boas' golden years ended abruptly when World War I began. Boas was German and had no qualms about talking about it. He often spoke German in public and lectured about German history. With the advent of World War I, this ended. The SS *Lusitania* sank in 1915, and sentiment towards German-Americans quickly turned hostile (King 107-108). Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, and many other German composers were banned; several states implemented policies which made it illegal to speak German in public and teach it in schools; mainstream opinion about Germans cast them as spies and barbarians; and Boas' position at Columbia soon was put in jeopardy when he spoke out against the war (108-110). Boas criticized President Wilson for his furthering of anti-German sentiment, but when the U.S. entered the war, his comments made him a suspect for espionage (110). Columbia cut his salary and referred to Boas' views as "anthropology, as construed from the German viewpoint" (10).

In 1917, Boas was asked to review a work by Madison Grant. The foremost scholar of racial theory, Grant was originally a conservationist and had many great and important ideas when it came to that. He saved the American bison from extinction, founded the Bronx Zoo, and

helped to regulate deer hunting in New York (King 86-87). In his efforts to save the American bison, Grant began to formulate opinions on eugenics, reading works by influential authors such as Francis Galton, Frederick Hoffman, and William Ripley (88-89). What he saw in the American west with the bison, he would see in New York with the 'Nordic man'. To Grant, the wolves which ruined the bison could be likened to the Jews, the Slavics, the Irish, the Polish – all invasive species that threatened to overtake the great Nordic race. As eugenics began to take precedence over his conservationist and progressive ideals, he lobbied in favor of eugenics. In 1906, Grant had Ota Benga, a Congolese slave originally taken to St. Louis, placed in the Bronx Zoo, alongside chimps and other apes (220).

Grant wrote *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1916, which was an incredibly popular book for decades. Grant's ability to summarize literal dozens of pieces of academic works on racial theories, add his own spin on it, and dumb it down for the masses was unprecedented. This book was the origin of the theory he called Nordicism; that the Nordic race is superior to all others. He also further expanded on the theory of miscegenation. He writes, "The cross between a white man and a negro is a negro; the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu; and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew" (King 91). In 1925, *The Passing of the Great Race* appeared in German translation. While in prison, Adolf Hitler read and took extensive notes on the book. He later held a lengthy correspondence with Grant, claiming that *The Passing of the Great Race* was 'my personal bible' (114).

Boas eagerly accepted the ability to review *The Passing of the Great Race*; one part because he wanted to critique the book, one part because he wanted work. Here, Boas laid out even further the anthropological perspective on race. He writes, "To speak of hereditary characteristics of a human race as a whole has no meaning" (King 111). Boas thought that Grant

also represented an issue at the core of racism: the idea of innate superiority of one's own culture. The west – and the world – would never move past racism until they recognized that no one culture or people was better than another culture or people. This, going forward, would become the central tenet of a principle of cultural anthropology called cultural relativism.

When the war ended, Boas was left in a shoddy department with three offices, teaching introductory courses. In 1924, immigration policies were overhauled, and Jews, Germans, Poles, and Italians were heavily limited in their entrance to the United States (King 113). Boas' sister, upon moving to the U.S., had all her possessions confiscated and left with no money or means of identifying herself (113). She would live with Boas for the rest of her life (113). Grant wrote glowingly of the new immigration policy, saying “We have closed our doors just in time to prevent our Nordic population being overrun by the lower races” (114).

Although Boas was only allowed to teach introductory courses, it worked out strangely for him. Columbia University was segregated by the sexes, and women were put into Barnard University, the so-called ‘sister school’ (King 117). If women were particularly good students, they could take courses at Columbia University normally only intended for men. They could only attend introductory courses; the only thing Boas could teach (116-119). He remarked on this phenomenon, writing to a colleague: “I have had a curious experience in graduate work during the last few years. All my best students are women” (119).

Of his many students, two of the most significant are from this period: Ruth Benedict, a folklorist who studied under Boas and received her PhD in 1923; and Margaret Mead, who studied under both Boas and Benedict and received her PhD in 1929. Benedict conducted her PhD, *The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America*, and became one of the few women in that period to receive a doctorate in any field (King 123). Benedict then studied extensively

the Zuni people in the Southwest. She was particularly interested in studying their gender relations. Women held exclusive property rights; wealth was transferred mother to daughter; ancestry went through the women of the family rather than the men; and men took their wife's name, rather than the other way around (124-125). Furthermore, a man had the ability to 'become' a woman. A man could dress as a woman, called themselves a woman, and would be respected as a woman (124). They could even go on to marry men (124). Men could also marry men without becoming a woman.

Returning from the southwest, Benedict became faculty at Columbia University alongside her former professor Boas. In 1923, Margaret Mead began attending Barnard University as a very good student (King 130). When Mead's close friend Marie Bloomfield committed suicide, Benedict sent her condolences, writing, "If you can get away, come [to my office]. I've nothing all day that can't be put off. I shall be thinking of you today, and wishing people could be of more use to each other in difficult times." (131). This was the beginning of a romantic relationship between the two, which would be realized fully when Mead received her PhD and joined the faculty of Columbia.

In 1936, Boas retired from teaching (King 302). Ruth Benedict was widely speculated to be the new director of the department of Anthropology, but the president of Columbia assigned Ralph Linton instead (302). Linton was a former student of Boas and a war veteran. He had shown up to one of Boas' lectures in his military uniform during World War I, and Boas berated him so badly that he ended up dropping the school and enrolling in a rival program at Harvard (118). He later complained that there was a "Jewish ring" at Columbia that was conspiring against him (118). The president of Columbia long believed there to be a ring of radicals within the Boas circle that included communists, saboteurs, and unpatriotic professors. When Boas left

his post, the president eagerly assigned Linton as head of department (303). Following Linton's assignment, the department broke out into chaos. It was split in two factions: The anti-Boasian followers of Linton, and the diehard supporters of Boas.

This all preceded the beginning of World War II and the rise of Nazis. When the Nazis took power, Boas became incredibly concerned, for obvious reasons. Although his family had mostly left Germany before the rise of Hitler, he feared for his academic colleagues. Even the ones who were not Jews, as he knew that even the faintest hint of dissent would be quelled. Alongside works by Freud and Marx, copies of Boas' works, and his PhD was rescinded from the University of Kiel (King 304). The department of anthropology at Columbia received dozens of letters from distraught German professors and students, asking for opportunities to teach or study abroad in the United States. Boas, too, became distraught. Benedict recalls Boas coming to her office several times to ask about any way to help (304).

The rise of the Nazis was the impetus for Boas to enter the public eye once again. He spoke in a series of national broadcasts, imploring academics and citizens to not only resist the rise of intolerance abroad, but domestically (King 305). Boas saw the German Nazi Party and the Italian Fascists not as something unique to their respective countries, but a result of a growing tide of intolerance. With the Nazi party's 1935 race legislation, they made it clear it was based on what they called the "U.S. model" (307).

The small department of anthropology at Columbia University housed, as the 30s ended, many academic refugees from Germany and elsewhere. He wrote letter after letter attempting to acquire positions for abroad and endangered academics, including the son-in-law of Albert Einstein and Paul Kirchoff, a noted German anthropologist who coined the term Mesoamerica (Lewis 459).

On December 21st, 1942, Boas attended a luncheon at the Columbia Faculty Diner (King 315). Boas intended to catch up with French ethnologist Paul Rivet, who had recently been ousted from his post at the Museum of Ethnology in Paris following the German invasion (316). While Rivet and Boas were speaking, Boas sat up with a start, clutched his chest, and fell back onto his chair. Attendants rushed towards him, but Boas would pass before the ambulance arrived. Young French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who had also escaped France (his family was Jewish), held Boas in his arms as he took his final breaths (316).

Following Boas' death, the anthropology department at Columbia was flooded with letters of condolences (King 316). Ruth Benedict wrote in his obituary, "He believed the world must be made safe for differences" (316). A shipyard in Chicago, following Boas' death, christened a new warship the SS *Franz Boas* in his honor (316). "It would have pleased him," said Benedict (316).

2. Legacy

In 2005, the American Anthropological Association rescinded the censure against Franz Boas that was passed in 1919 ("Uncensoring Franz Boas"). This censure was a result of Boas speaking out against the First World War ("Uncensoring"). President of the American Anthropological Association Clark Wissler passed the motion to censure him, and it would take almost a hundred years for this censure to be overturned ("Uncensoring").

Although during his life and shortly after his death he was a controversial figure, Franz Boas has now been all but universally accepted as the most important anthropologist of all time. Boas' four-field approach which combined linguistics, human biology, ethnology, and archaeology, is now the dominant field in anthropology in the United States. Along with this, his two ideas regarding the analysis of culture have now become integral parts of the study of

anthropology. Historical particularism, the idea that the differences between societies are the result of complex historical processes; and cultural relativism, the idea that a culture can only be understood by first understanding that culture's standards and values, rather than relying on one's own standards and values (Vivanco).

While his conclusions drawn after studying the descendants of immigrants was mostly discarded during his life, modern evidence points to him being correct. Melanin, the pigment that leads to dark skin in humans, is the result of long-term adaptation to UV radiation (Brenner 8). Melanin serves as a barrier that scatters ultraviolet radiation, absorbing anywhere between 50% to 75% of the radiation, protecting the inner layers of the skin, and thus DNA, from being damaged (5). Furthermore, ultraviolet A (UVA) rays cause 40 times more DNA single strand breaks in people with white skin than people with dark skin (10). This all points to the idea that, rather than being some immutable thing, skin color is heavily influenced by the environment – something Boas attempted to prove with anthropometry.

Although Boas died, his legacy lives on in all those who deign to fight scientific racism. He was, beyond any other description, a combatant who viciously attacked the idea of biological supremacy. His students would prove to be equally important. Margaret Mead would go on to heavily influence the beginning of the 1960 sexual revolution with her research on gender and sexuality (Popova). She writes in 1933 to her girlfriend, Ruth Benedict: "...I believe every person of ordinary sex endowment has a capacity for diffuse "homosexual" sex expression, and specific climax — according to the temperamental situation. To call men who prefer the diffuse expression "feminine" — or women who seek only the specific, "masculine," or both "mixed types" is a lot of obfuscation" (Popova). This was decades before the DSM removed homosexuality from the list of mental disturbances (Popova). Both Mead and Benedict would be

inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame; Mead in 1976, Benedict in 2005 ("Mead, Margaret", "Benedict, Ruth Fulton").

Boas, on November 6th, 1939, writes to American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, the following: "There are two matters to which I am devoted: absolute intellectual and spiritual freedom, and the subordination of the state to the interests of the individual; expressed in other forms, the furthering of conditions in which the individual can develop to the best of his own ability – as far as this is possible with a full understanding of the fetters imposed upon us by tradition; and the fight against all forms power policy of states or private organizations. This means devotion to principles of a true democracy. I object to the teaching of slogans intended to befog the mind, of whatever kind they may be." ("Dewey, John: From Boas.")

Works Cited

- “Benedict, Ruth Fulton.” *National Women’s Hall of Fame*,
www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/ruth-fulton-benedict/
- Brenner, Michaela and Hearing, Vincent. “The Protective Role of Melanin Against UV Damage in Human Skin.” *Photochem Photobiol*, 84, 3, 2008, 539-549.
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2671032/pdf/nihms103064.pdf
- “Dewey, John: From Boas. 1939 Nov. 6.” *APS Digital Library*, American Philosophical Society,
diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/text:36969#page/1/mode/1up.
- King, Charles. *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century*. Doubleday, New York. 2019.
- “Mead, Margaret.” *National Women’s Hall of Fame*,
www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/margaret-mead/
- Popova, Maria. “Legendary Anthropologist Margaret Mead on the Fluidity of Human Sexuality in 1933.” *Brain Pickings*, 8 May 2017, www.brainpickings.org/2014/02/06/margaret-mead-homosexuality/.
- “Uncensoring Franz Boas.” *American Anthropological Association*.
www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2134
- Vivanco, Luis A. “A Dictionary of Cultural Anthropology.” *Oxford Reference*, Oxford University Press, 2018,
www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191836688.001.0001/acref-9780191836688.
- Zumwalt, Rosemary L. *Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist (Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology)*. University of Nebraska Press, Nebraska. 2019.