The Passion of Franz Boas

The reputation of Franz Boas as a scientist declined in the decades after his death in 1942, but his reputation as a champion of human rights and an opponent of racism remained intact. More recently, however, some writers have questioned the sincerity, the results, and the political implications of his anthropology and his work against racism and ethnocentrism. Others have been critical of his relations with colleagues and students such as Ella Deloria and Zora Neale Hurston. In this essay I discuss some of these claims and present a more positive view. Franz Boas was passionately and consistently concerned about human rights and individual liberty, freedom of inquiry and speech, equality of opportunity, and the defeat of prejudice and chauvinism. He struggled for a lifetime to advance a science that would serve humanity, and he was as much of a humanitarian in private as he was in public. [Boas, political struggles, human relations]

When a group of scholars believes that they have a new and better way to understand reality than their teachers and predecessors, it is quite natural that they turn on those forerunners and try to demonstrate their superiority. To them the previous generation seems hopelessly old-fashioned, wrongheaded, and on the wrong track.

This was the case in anthropology in the mid-1950s when a group of dynamic young scholars entered the field. They were convinced of the necessity to turn anthropology into a "real" science, one that could deal with regularities, causality, and law. The answers were to be sought in the core features of material culture and technology, the organization of economies, and the relations between culture and environment. Leslie White and Julian Steward were the gods; Morton Fried, Marvin Harris, Robert A. Manners, Marshall Sahlins the Younger, Elman Service, and Eric Wolf were among their prophets.

Under these circumstances, Franz Boas, who had strongly cautioned against hasty and unsupported generalizations and against determinisms of all sorts (biological, geographical, economic, or psychological), whose ethnographies did not come to closure in tidy packages, would seem to be a foolish old man holding back the advance of science. His suspicion of universal categories, his rejection of grand narratives (before we knew that this is what they were called), and his stress on diversity and historical contingency were not appreciated then. He was, however, honored for his insistence upon the equality of all peoples and his battle against racism and ethnocentrism, even if his approach to science was in disrepute.

It is understandable that each intellectual generation feels it must distance itself from its predecessors, something Boas himself understood and appreciated. In the 1960s, however, criticism of Boas began to develop an additional dimension—an attack on the character of the man himself. Leslie White (1966:26-28) accused Boas of a number of unpleasant things, especially of being receptive only to Jewish students and being prejudiced against American scholarship. It was a nasty little piece, but it probably had some lingering effect, as these things often do. (In fact, Boas's allies and closest associates included such non-Jews as Ruth Fulton Benedict, Elsie Clews Parsons, Gladys Reichard, Margaret Mead, Frederic Ward Putnam, Livingston Farrand, Henry H. Donaldson, Frank Speck, W J McGee, Fay-Cooper Cole, Alfred Tozzer, and L. C. Dunn.)

More recently, however, there has been an efflorescence of denigration of Franz Boas, his motivations, his relations to others, and, most seriously, the long-term impact of his ideas on race and culture. One of the earliest manifestations of this new view of Boas came in a paper by William S. Willis Jr., in which he argued (among other things) that Boasian "scientific antiracism was concerned only secondarily with colored peoples." (1969:139, emphasis in original). Willis contended that "scientific antiracism" was in
reality both an attempt to combat anti-Semitism and an intellectual weapon in the struggle of Boas and the other European Jews around him “for the domination of anthropology in the United States” (p. 139). He concluded that the effort of Boas and his colleagues to combat racism was just “another exploitation of colored peoples for the benefit of white people” (p. 139).

This paper appeared as a chapter in the influential work edited by Dell Hymes, Reinventing Anthropology (1969), and it reflected the general anger and dissatisfaction of the late 1960s. Willis would later develop considerable respect for Franz Boas, but this piece was one of those that set a tone for succeeding discourse on the subject of anthropology and “the study of dominated colored peoples” (p. 146).

In the era of postcolonial and critical studies there is a newer trope that sees Boas’s work as even more harmful. K. Visweswaran contends that Boas’s “scientific anti-racism” itself had terrible results. In a 1998 paper she writes, “I suggest the disturbing possibility that the attempt to expunge race from social science by assigning it to biology, as Boas and his students did, helped legitimate the scientific study of race, thereby fueling the machine of scientific racism” (1998:70). What can be more of a condemnation than that? What we used to think was “a good thing,” Boas’s many-sided attack on racism, we are now told was in fact very bad—not just because others misused his science but because he got it so wrong.

It is true, of course, that the findings of science may be co-opted and used by those with different and pernicious agendas. I contend, however, that this has not been the case with Boas’s “scientific anti-racism.” It has not been co-opted and misused as Visweswaran believes, nor has she given a coherent picture of how it occurred and what role Boas’s work could have played in it. In fact, the real point of Visweswaran’s article is to present her own thinking on the nature of “race” as a social construct and a potential political tool for the use of the dominated. The question is why she felt it necessary to launch an irrelevant and inaccurate assault on Franz Boas in order to accomplish that aim.

Similarly, Franz Boas’s efforts to learn about Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka’wakw) culture through the texts collected in that language by George Hunt are subjected to harsh criticism by Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman (1999). Going far beyond earlier critics like Verne Ray (1955) and Leslie White (1963), who had found Boas’s efforts inadequate if not useless, Briggs and Bauman contend that these texts were truly harmful. While denying that they intend to damn Boas (p. 481), they find that his work “fit into the larger contours of colonial domination that increasingly deprived Native American communities of land, material wealth, and cultural and linguistic autonomy” (1999:516)! They find him “complicit in naturalizing white control of Native American communities and the ideology of ‘as-similation’” (p. 519) and they even claim that these Kwakwaka’wakw texts “formed crucial dimensions not only of creating an American discipline of anthropology but of constructing fin de siècle modernity as well!” (1999:522, emphasis added). All this because he urged George Hunt to collect accurate descriptions of the technology, customs, beliefs, laws, and stories of the Kwakwaka’wakw, in their own language, concentrating on “traditional” and precontact material as much as possible.

There is no room here to deconstruct this dense fifty-page paper, but we may ask how a series of recondite texts, read by at most a handful of academic specialists, could conceivably have had such world-constructing consequences. At a time when the Kwakwaka’wakw (and all Native American communities) had been under white domination for generations, when their way of life and practices were under constant attack and had undergone many changes, could the collection of texts, no matter how ineptly done, possibly have had such consequences for these peoples—and for “modernity” as well? Briggs and Bauman can only assert it; they cannot demonstrate it.

Their paper represents a common pattern in deconstructionist and postcolonial scholarship: the attempt to demonstrate that some phenomenon that might seem positive or at least neutral was, in fact, injurious to the “Other.” In this case it is “the textual construction of Others” (p. 482)—in their words. Noting that “Ethnopoetics and post-structuralist critiques of ethnography have converged of late in casting a favorable light on Boas’s oeuvre” (p. 481), the authors set out to demonstrate that this favorable evaluation is wrong. (They cite, among others, Clifford 1982, 1988; Hymes 1981, 1985; Krupat 1992.) Their paper has a sadly predictable outcome, one that leaves us poorer in our understanding of Boas, his work, and the processes of social and cultural change. As Hymes and others point out, the texts remain as a record of the language, poetry, beliefs, ideas, arts, and practices of the people, available for both the descendants of the Kwakwaka’wakw informants as well as for outsider linguists, anthropologists, and literary scholars. Dell Hymes writes of his studies of texts from these collections, “I think of it as repatriation, for the benefit of descendants of those who inhabited the narrative tradition and of others who can learn from it. Learn more deeply what was there before the whites came, what has been lost” (1999a:xvii, also 1999b; cf. Berman 1996; DeMallie 1999; Jacknis 1996:209). It was precisely Boas’s insistence on trying to record “what has been lost,” which Briggs and Bauman deplore, that makes the texts so valuable today.

In another sphere, as Zora Neale Hurston, Boas’s one-time student, has become a figure of considerable importance, a number of writers (Hazel Carby [1990], Karla Holloway [1987], Susan E. Meisenhelder [1999], Guido Podesta [1991]) believe they have discovered that Boas’s influence was actually benevolent to Hurston and her work.
One might think that a teacher who supported and encouraged a black woman in the 1920s to get a Ph.D. through the study and appreciation of southern Negro culture might be lauded for this, but one would be wrong. As George Hutchinson writes, “Yet Boas’s very encouragement of Hurston as an anthropologist has, in recent years, been used against him in arguments [long on innuendo, short on evidence] about how she had to fight for creative independence!” (1995:70, also 462–464). Meisenhelder, for example, blames Boas for “dictating the focus of her research and treating her as an aider or informant rather than a researcher in her own right” (1999:15), and she writes of Hurston’s “covert resistance” to him. At best, these assertions are based upon unnecessarily harsh readings of a few letters between Hurston and Boas, but they are typical of the current discourse (e.g., Meisenhelder 1999:14–17; cf. Podesta 1991:397).

Holloway goes even farther, drawing upon the terrible image of the Southern plantation, if not of slavery, writing, “It is not unfair to see ‘Papa Franz’ as the paternal white overseer to this black woman student who called herself Barnard’s ‘sacred Black cow’ in a forthright and unambiguous acknowledgment of her status” (1987:2). What can be more damning than this, if true? I suggest, however, that such an interpretation is both unwarranted by the available evidence and unhelpful for our understanding of Hurston’s life or accomplishments.

Like Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Deloria, a Dakota woman who worked closely with Franz Boas, has also gained belated recognition as an author. In this case, Janet Finn (1995) believes there were problems in their relationship as well, imputing cultural insensitivity and lack of understanding to Boas. (See more below.)

Thus, according to these accounts, not only did Franz Boas hold back the advance of science and treat non-Jewish students and minority women badly, but he was also responsible for both the resurgence of “scientific racism” and the creation of a climate conducive to colonial domination as well. The last shreds of Boasian pride, the last prop that sustained respect for Boas’s accomplishments in the quest for the good, the true, and the humane, has been knocked from under him. Far from having stood up to and defeated scientific racism, Boas is now seen to have been complicit in furthering it, as well as being “complicit in naturalizing white control of Native American communities,” and complicit in the failure of liberal pluralism and the development of “the language of cloaked racism” (Star 1997).

Franz Boas and the Zeitgeist

I contend that most of these negative claims about Boas are not well-founded criticisms of the results of his anthropological work or of his relations with others but are largely gratuitous and sometimes far-fetched. (There is no room here to take them on in detail, but one could make convincing arguments against them all.) Why do these writers make such harsh but unsupported claims, and what does it tell us about our times?

As never before, anthropologists and their interlocutors are looking at anthropology’s past in a critical manner. This trend began as part of the general criticism of American and “Western” society during the late 1960s (Hymes 1969, for example). It was sparked by the general dissatisfaction and the anger that accompanied the Vietnam War and was heightened by the struggles of the civil rights movement, the movement for women’s rights, the worldwide student movements of the late 1960s, and concern about the condition of peoples in the colonial world. Some of the earliest critics and advocates of “critical theory” drew heavily on Marxist writings, but they were soon joined, and overwhelmed by, scholars concerned with women’s studies, black and other ethnic studies, the French connection (Foucault, Derrida, and many others), postcolonial and subaltern studies, cultural studies, and “critical studies.” Clearly the discourse of criticism of anthropology is over-determined (see Lewis 1998a).

Along with these came the “literary turn” of postmodernism, Clifford Geertz’s pieces about the writing of anthropologists, and the development of a historiography of anthropology ably led by George W. Stocking Jr. Whereas Stocking and many of those he has inspired tend toward “historicism” (Stocking 1968:1–12), much of the other writing has the negative air that is fundamental to “critical studies” and Critique of Anthropology. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that there will be a variety of critiques of Franz Boas. He presents a huge target; there is so much of him everywhere that he is very easy to hit.

Over the decades there have been several distinct sources of criticism of Franz Boas. The first major criticism within the field of anthropology came from those who took the scientific and positivistic perspective that was usually associated with neo-evolutionism, cultural ecology, and cultural materialism. Boas was portrayed as a mere collector of facts, rushing about to save scraps of information about dying cultures with “a philosophy of ‘planless hodge-podge-ism’” (White 1943:355). Earlier than this, of course, the proponents of racial determinism and “nativism” saw Boas as an enemy whose work threatened their view of the necessity for “whites of solid Anglo-Saxon stock” to keep the “lesser breeds” from spoiling their America. And even today there are those on the right of the sociopolitical spectrum, such as the late Allen Bloom (1988) and Dinesh D’Souza (1995), who consider what they believe to be the cultural relativism of Boas and his students morally and politically reprehensible.

Normally we would expect that those who have contempt for positivism and scientism might be favorably disposed toward one who is thought to have been opposed to the same things. We would also expect that enemies of racism, who celebrate diversity, would also celebrate the
man who led the fight against racism and for the appreciation of other cultures. But we would be wrong again. Even though Franz Boas can reasonably be seen as a forerunner of certain key ideas that are held dear today, his critics on the “postmodernist” side seem more unforgiving than those on the “modernist” side.

A postmodernist rationale for such critiques might be that they are important because they contextualize Boas’s work and his activities as a liberal beyond his own self-awareness. Such analyses are meant to show the unintended consequences of even high-minded scholarship in a society such as ours. But these fashionable critiques are often insensitive to historical context, eschew benign but equally reasonable alternative interpretations, and are cavalier about cause and effect. They rarely include a demonstration of the actual linkages between the written word and the harm that these texts are said to have caused to “the Other.”

In the rest of the essay I offer a view of the Franz Boas, with specific reference to his political activities and his relations with others, that I hope may encourage some readers to be more understanding of Franz Boas and more critical of the negative claims. His life was lived in the service of precisely the values professed by many of his critics, and he achieved positive results that few scholars have ever matched. While it is certainly true that anyone’s best efforts may go wrong, and one’s scholarship may be misused and perverted by others, I believe that Boas’s critics have so far failed to demonstrate that this has been the case.

In Defense of Franz Boas

It is difficult today to realize the extent of Franz Boas’s influence as a scholar, as an institution-builder, and as a public intellectual, because the scope of his work was so enormous and his impact was so widespread. In the absence of any complete biography, we must depend upon widely scattered articles and chapters. Even George Stocking’s numerous indispensable contributions to our knowledge and understanding of Franz Boas pale before the magnitude of the man’s efforts and accomplishments, and Douglas Cole’s recent biography (1999) of Boas takes us only up to 1906. The AA memoirs edited by A. L. Kroeber (1943) and Walter Goldschmidt (1959) brought together the efforts of more than a dozen specialists to discuss and evaluate different aspects of his work, but they did not begin to cover the total range of even his scholarship, let alone his political efforts or his institution-building. Until we get the great works that should be written about his life and work, we must continue writing articles and chapters and hope to contribute little bits to the overall mosaic.

Franz Boas’s Ideals

Franz Boas’s values will seem naive to some today, but here is a summary of the central beliefs that he brought with him from the start of his long career, as they can be derived from his published writings and letters.

1. Boas believed in the pursuit of “truth” through the science of anthropology “in the interests of mankind” (a phrase he often used). Any such “truths,” however, could only be tentative and fallible because he (like his contemporaries, the pragmatists) recognized that all premises, conclusions, and beliefs are—and by their very nature must be—subject to criticism, challenge, modification, and further interpretation. (For more on Boas and pragmatism see Lewis 2001.) As Boas himself wrote, “Whatever our generation may achieve will attain in course of time that venerable aspect that will lay in chains the minds of the great mass of our successors and it will require new efforts to free a future generation of the shackles that we are forging” (1918:140).

His science was built upon both humanistic and historicist traditions as well as those of the physical sciences. When appropriate, for studies of human growth and child development, or studies of human variation, he would call upon anthropometry and the new field of statistics (in which he was a significant innovator). At other times he addressed human history, creativity, and emotion, perhaps through the arts or language or even politics.

For him to advance his program meant not only carrying out research and reporting the results but training students, establishing anthropological institutions in the United States and elsewhere, securing funding for researchers and institutions, and striving to get research results published. He worked actively and simultaneously on all of these fronts until the day he died.

2. He believed, early in his career at least, that anthropology—science—could be used to improve the human condition by lessening the reign of the unknown and ignorance ("the irrational authority of tradition" [Stocking 1979:96]) and by decreasing the barriers and misunderstandings among peoples. He thought of anthropology as a tool with which to fight for the rights of the oppressed and the mistreated. And he believed in taking an activist stance in the world regardless of the odds against him and the causes in which he believed. “For Boas, ‘doing something’ always meant using his science in the cause of man” (Bunzel 1962:6). This will be amply demonstrated in this paper.

3. He insisted upon freedom of inquiry and freedom of expression and was devoted to the idea that a person should develop his or her own “innate powers” and should be a thinking, independent individual. He fought against the constraints of tradition and convention ("the
shackles of dogma”) all his life. (Boas quoted in Stocking 1974:41–42.)

In 1939 Boas wrote to John Dewey about his concerns:

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 it is possible with a full understanding of the fetters imposed upon us by tradition; and the fight against all forms of power policy of states or private organizations. This means a 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. [11/6/39]10

4. He fervently believed in the absolute value of equal rights and equal opportunity for all individuals and peoples. He hated classifying and lumping people into categories and insisted upon the importance of individuality. He had contempt for chauvinism and narrow loyalties at the expense of other groups and of humankind. This also meant respecting other ways of life, other cultures, and not assuming a priori the superiority of one’s own.

It is somewhat difficult for us to recognize that the value which we attribute to our own civilization is due to the fact that we participate in this civilization, and that it has been controlling all our actions since the time of our birth: but it is certainly conceivable that there may be other civilizations, based perhaps on different traditions and on a different equilibrium of emotion and reason, which are of no less value than ours. although it may be impossible for us to appreciate their values without having grown up under their influence.

The general theory of valuation of human activities, as developed by anthropological research, teaches us a higher tolerance than the one which we now profess. [Boas 1911:208–209]

5. Although he argued strenuously against the assumption that one’s own culture (American, German, “western,” or any other) was superior to others, he did not, as a result, argue that one should suspend judgement on matters of ultimate values. He was not an ethical relativist but believed fervently in the pursuit of these values (Bunzel 1962:9).

As an anthropologist I feel very strongly that it is possible to state certain fundamental truths which are common to all mankind, notwithstanding the form in which they occur in special societies. These general human characteristics are a protection against a general relativistic attitude. I believe that the ability to see the general human truth under the social forms in which it occurs is one of the viewpoints that ought to be most strongly emphasized. [letter to ACLS, 2/17/41. emphasis added]

Franz Boas’s perspective has been described by George Stocking “as a struggle to preserve the cultural conditions of the search for universal rational knowledge, and on the other [hand], a struggle to defend the validity of alternative cultural worlds” (1979:97). And throughout his career, almost 60 years, he labored ceaselessly to put these values into practice.

The Background

Franz Boas derived these core values from the world in which he grew up, in Germany at a moment in history when there was a strong politically liberal, intellectually self-conscious movement among scientists, artists, and thinkers (Liss 1996). This moment drew upon elements of the Enlightenment and the Romantic-Liberal movements and, in the case of the many German Jews who were influenced by it, the Jewish prophetic tradition as well. (Boas himself would probably have been hesitant to acknowledge the last, however [Glick 1982; Liss 1997].)

“The background of my early thinking was a German home in which the ideals of the revolution of 1848 were a living force” (Boas 1938a:201). This tradition valued science, knowledge, freedom, and the role of the freethinking individual. Its heroes included Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and the Von Humboldt brothers (Wilhelm the linguist, educator, and statesman; Alexander the great traveler, geographer, and cosmographer). It was a peculiarly German movement, and one that many German Jews embraced passionately (Mosse 1985). And among these Jews was Boas’s mother, Sophie, who was an educator and feminist, to whom he was particularly close.11

Franz Boas was born in 1858, a decade after the unsuccessful revolution of 1848, but despite the rigid regime of Chancellor Bismark there were still people in Germany who believed in these principles. One of these was Rudolph Virchow, a physician, pathologist, scientist, and radical activist, who was prominent in German science and politics. Boas admired Virchow greatly, took a course in anthropometry with him before embarking on his Baffin Island field trip in 1883, and clearly looked upon the older man as a figure to emulate (Stocking 1974:22).

The failure of the Revolution of 1848 had, however, led to the emigration to America of the “Forty-Eighthers,” people such as Franz’s uncle by marriage, Abraham Jacobi, who became a leading physician and a well-known and outspoken liberal humanitarian (Boas and Meyer 1999; Link 1949); Ottilie Assing, abolitionist and translator and supporter of Frederick Douglass; Carl Schurz, prominent liberal politician who fought against slavery and corruption and for education, “culture,” and the rights of laboring people; and Felix Adler, the founder of the Society for Ethical Culture, who worked for maternal and child welfare, medical care for the poor, and civic reform (as did Jacobi). Franz’s wife’s father, Ernst Krakowizer, who died before Boas could meet him, was another such “scientist, physician,
Franz Boas’s Ideals in Words and Action

After completing his Ph.D. in psychophysiology in Germany (U. of Kiel), serving his year of compulsory service in the German army, and spending a year carrying out research among the Inuit of Baffin Island, Boas had to decide where and how to pursue his goals and his career. We are fortunate to have the evidence of his thinking from letters that he wrote to his parents in Germany and to the young woman he loved and wanted to marry, Marie Krakowizer, who lived in New York.

While he was in Baffinland he wrote her (December 23, 1883):

The fear of traditions and old customs is deeply implanted in mankind, and in the same way as it regulates life here [among the Eskimos], it halts all progress for us. I believe it is a difficult struggle for every individual and every people to give up traditions and follow the path to truth. . . . I believe, if this trip has for me (as a thinking person) a valuable influence, it lies in the strengthening of the viewpoint of the relativity of all cultivation [bildung] and that the evil as well as the value of a person lies in the cultivation of the heart [herzensbildung], which I find here just as much as amongst us, and that all service, therefore, which a man can perform for humanity must serve to promote truth. Indeed, if he who promotes truth searches for it and spreads it, it may be said that he has not lived in vain! [Cole 1983:33, 37]

And on January 22, 1884—

Will fortune be good to me that I can hope to see our fondest wishes realized speedily? I do not want a German professorship because I know I would be restricted to my science and to teaching, for which I have little inclination. I should much prefer to live in America in order to be able to further those ideas for which I live. . . . What I want to live and die for, is equal rights for all, equal possibilities to learn and work for poor and rich alike! Don’t you believe that to have done even the smallest bit for this, is more than all science taken together? I do not think I would be allowed to do this in Germany. [Cole 1983:37]

After spending the winter of 1884 in New York, he returned to Germany, where he accepted a position at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and gained the title of Docent in Geography. By 1886 he had left Germany and soon after committed himself to life in the United States (Herskovits 1953:12). Looking back on his decision in 1930, he wrote his sister, “The main reason was probably that I saw no future there and that I wanted to get married. [Marie was an American.] But there was more behind it. The anti-Semitism during my university years, the intrigues in Berlin when I wanted to habilitate myself, and the idea that America was politically an ideal country seem to have been the main motives. The draft probably also had a part in it” (12/8/30, Boas quoted in Rohner 1969:295). Considering the apparently heartfelt sentiments he expressed to Marie and to his uncle (“scientific activity alone is not enough; I must be able to livingly create”), and his subsequent behavior, it is very likely that he was thinking at least as much of political progress as his personal academic advancement (Hyatt 1990:12; Stocking 1968:150; cf. Barkan 1992:78–79).

Early Years: The Critique of Racism and Ethnocentrism

Franz Boas came to the United States to stay in 1886, and, although he rapidly won professional recognition, he had a difficult time earning a living and finding stability for the first decade. He held a number of temporary positions until 1896, when he finally got posts in New York at the American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University. During this time he had a growing family, with four children (he eventually had six, but one died within the first year), and he carried on an incredible pace of research, publication, and organization. His research included fieldwork in Northwest Coast ethnography, the general study of Indian languages, and anthropometric and statistical studies of the growth and development of children in Worcester, Massachusetts. He worked as an assistant editor of Science, started a program of research and teaching anthropology at Clark University, and collaborated in the organization of anthropology at the World’s Columbian Exposition and the Field Museum in Chicago.

Boas played a leading role in founding the American Folklore Society and editing the Journal of American Folk-Lore, in raising the status of the Anthropological Society of Washington (Stocking 1968:283), and in furthering research on American Indian languages through the Smithsonian/Bureau of American Ethnology. During this period he published a number of classic articles with portentous theoretical implications, and the book The Central Eskimo, and many reports, monographs, and lesser articles. His bibliography for the years 1886–96 contains 170 items that range over the fields of physical and cultural anthropology, linguistics, psychology, geography, and meteorology (bibliography in Kroeber 1943). And throughout this period he had to expend an inordinate amount of time and energy on personal and professional struggles at Clark University and the Field Museum, and with the Bureau of American Ethnology (Hyatt 1990; Stocking 1960, 1968).

The idea that Franz Boas did not engage in overt political activity during his first decades in the United States has become widely accepted. (Barkan is the most dismissive of Boas’s political concerns, writing, “the ivory tower remained a secluded haven for him during the next thirty years” [1992:89], but see also Baker 1997; Levenstein 1963; Stocking 1979) Given his employment problems and the activities and accomplishments enumerated above,
we might reasonably ask when he would have had time to become politically engaged, but there are other reasons to question this idea. Although he may not have been involved in specific political organizations and causes during his first years in America, he was already working toward the establishment of a new view of humanity in keeping with both his science and his values.

When Boas began his work in America, evolutionism was the dominant (even “hegemonic”) paradigm in anthropology, sociology, and political economy. Intellectuals of the political left were as invested in evolutionism as were those on the right (see Pittenger 1993; Stern 1931). In addition to evolutionism, racial determinism and Social Darwinism were also in the ascendance (Harris 1968; Stocking 1968), and these touched the emotions and socioeconomic interests of American and European elites even more. This was the era of the passage of Jim Crow laws, racial segregation, and anti-black and antiforeigner agitation. Despite their entrenched status in American and European intellectual and political life, however, Boas, a new immigrant, virtually alone, started to combat all of these from the very beginning of his career, drawing upon his view of humanity and on his science. Were these not political acts?

Boas’s attack on evolutionism, in addition to its theoretical and technical aspects, involved an attempt to establish the common humanity of “primitive man” in scientific and popular discourse; to remove the supposed gap between “our” minds and “theirs”; and to question the assumption that “our” culture is special, exalted, better than others (Boas 1888, 1899, 1904). As Stocking (1968) has shown, the evolutionism of this period was heavily weighted with assumptions of the biological and mental inferiority of “the colored races” and “the primitives.” Boas attacked this position directly, from a variety of perspectives, beginning as early as his first articles in Science. For example, in one short paper he attempted to demonstrate that, contrary to accepted opinion, “the mind of the native enjoys as well the beauties of nature as we do: that he expresses his grief in mournful songs, and appreciates humorous conceptions” (1887:383). “These few examples will show that the mind of the ‘savage’ is sensible to the beauties of poetry and music and it is only the superficial observer to whom he appears stupid and unfeeling” (p. 385). (For an example of the view he was contesting see J. Lubbock 1865.)

Boas’s work on “racial difference,” in physical anthropology, had the intended effect of calling into question 60 or 70 years of “scientific” racial determinism, the intellectual rationalization for segregation. His research on “The Half-Blood Indian” is one early example. A key element in the argument of the racial determinists was that “hybrid races show a decrease in fertility, and are therefore not likely to survive” [Boas 1894a:138] and that they show general physical and mental deterioration (Boas 1894a). But the conclusions of his research, published in Popular Science Monthly, showed something quite different: both the fertility and the stature of the “Half-Blood Indian” surpassed that of either of the parental populations. In addition to the contributions of this study to the study of human heredity, it was a direct challenge to the arguments of the racists and the laws barring intermarriage that were just then being promulgated. Not long after, he would advocate intermarriage between black and white. What could be more political and daring in the racist climate of that time?

Beginning in 1894, Boas began to directly confront the question of the differences between “primitive man” and “civilized man,” and racial differences and racial prejudices in a series of papers that eventuated in his 1911 book, The Mind of Primitive Man. The main arguments were: “There is no fundamental difference in the ways of thinking of primitive and civilized man. A close connection between race and personality has never been established. The concept of racial type as commonly used even in scientific literature is misleading and requires a logical as well as a biological redefinition” (Boas 1938b:v). He also argued that “achievements of races do not warrant us to assume that one race is more highly gifted than another” (Boas 1894b; Boas quoted in Stocking 1974:227); that civilizations are the product of history, including diffusion and chance, rather than biology; “that environment has an important effect upon the anatomical structure and physiological functions of man” (1911:75); that each “race” contains so much variation within it that the average differences between it and others are much less than each contains within itself; and that racial prejudice is “the most formidable obstacle to a clear understanding” of these problems (1911:245).

He concludes the book with a plea for greater tolerance of other “forms of civilization” and sympathy for “foreign races” so that, “as all races have contributed in the past to cultural progress in one way or another, so they will be capable of advancing the interests of mankind, if we are only willing to give them a fair opportunity” (1911:278). The book was very influential and widely read, one of those “books which have changed men’s minds” (Bunzel 1962:10; Degler 1989:19–19), basic for all who wanted to believe in the equality and common humanity of all peoples. In addition, as Hutchinson points out, the leading liberal-left weeklies, The Nation and The New Republic, both closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance, “relied on the Boas school for commentary and reviews concerning anthropology and racial theory” (1995:209).

Boas’s comparative studies of European immigrants and their American-born descendants (e.g., 1910–13, 1916, 1922) struck “a stunning blow at those who doubted the power of the environment” (Degler 1989:3). Boas had a lifelong interest in problems of growth, environment (especially health and nutrition), and heredity, beginning with his studies of growth in Worcester in 1890, and in 1908 he received funds for a study of almost 18,000 new immigrants and their American-born children. The results, reported
from 1912 on, indicated marked changes of form from the parents to the children. What was most striking was his finding that head shape (cephalic index), until then considered both diagnostic of "racial" types and stable over time, was shown to be quite unstable and clearly affected by environmental change. This was of major importance because (a) it pointed to "a great plasticity of human types" that (b) could be seriously influenced by environment. It effectively called into question the usefulness of the cephalic index for historical reconstruction or "racial identification," and it was one more element calling into question the accepted view of "race." He also reports the finding that "The average stature of children decreases with the size of the family" (1940a:63). Insofar as stature is taken as a measure of health and biological success, he is reporting a finding related to class and living conditions. He was always concerned with the impact of socioeconomic factors on health, nutrition, growth, and well-being, both theoretically and practically.

The series of papers that Franz Boas published from 1910 until his death in 1942 report the findings of his research on aspects of "race" that led him (a) to deny the usefulness of the concept; (b) to stress the need to consider each person not as a member of a "race" but as an individual; and (c) to demonstrate the ways in which socioeconomic conditions (and thus political decisions) affected the well-being and achievements of various populations. All of these gave ammunition to those who wanted to believe in equality, who were against Jim Crow, and who opposed "racially" based immigration restrictions. To take just one example, Carl Degler has documented Boas's influence in turning the sociologists of the University of Chicago away from racial explanations of behavior (1991: 84 ff.). As Bernhard J. Stern put it, "It must be credited in large measure to Boas and his students that a considerable modification of the thought of the nation has taken place in recent years in this important field of controversy" (1959: 218, also Stocking 1968:300).

Research into Other Social Problems

In January 1905, Franz Boas submitted a proposal to the Bureau of American Ethnology and the Carnegie Foundation for a massive comparative study, focusing on American Indians and Negro populations. He called for a major multifaceted research effort with five main components. The first three were oriented toward both specific historical and general theoretical issues, but the fourth and fifth were directed to social and economic problems.

Part four was to be a study of the effects of social conditions, climatic adaptations, and race mixture upon the Indians with the intention of gaining understanding in order to guide government policy with respect to education and economic development. He hoped that such studies would help mitigate the hardships that Indians were enduring. (One idea was to explore the potential economic and cultural role of Indian arts such as pottery making, basketry, and woodcarving.)

Although he was not involved in an organized movement for Indian rights at this time, as early as 1898 he spoke out against the outlawing of the potlatch in Canada, and he continued to write against the prohibition of Indian dancing and the use of peyote. In 1903 he wrote to Natalie Curtis, "I think you are quite right in regretting that the cultural achievements of the Indians are not made use of in their education. On the whole, the neglect to take into consideration the culture of the tribe has the effect that the school-teaching that the Indians receive is a very thin veneer covering their ancient ideas, or, in less favorable cases, it degrades the character of the Indians instead of uplifting them" (8/20/03).

He seems to have been concerned about Indian rights and culture all his life, but he felt powerless to help. "(I had a council with the Indians, who are really suffering because of the stupid persecution of their customs by the [Canadian] government. I can do nothing about it, but promised to do my best in Ottawa. I am not certain what I can do because the missionaries here are behind it all. It goes so far that the children in school are not allowed to draw in the traditional style of their people but [only] according to prescribed models" [to Ernst. 11/18/30; Boas quoted in Rohner 1969:291].) The first time anthropologists had any hope of affecting government policy was during the New Deal and the administration of John Collier as commissioner of Indian affairs, but many were suspicious of Collier. In a letter to Collier (12/7/33), Boas speaks of the detrimental effects of the allotment system, of the leasing of land, and of the failings of Indian boarding schools. "I merely repeat a commonplace if I state that the contempt of customs and beliefs of the Indians which is instilled in the young is one of the elements that must be overcome."

In the fifth part of his research proposal he called for a parallel study of the Negro population, also dealing with "race mixture" as well as with child development, health, and education. This study, too, would be directed toward the amelioration of poverty, discrimination, and sociopolitical marginalization.

The project was not funded, but this proposal, made almost a century ago, shows that Franz Boas was urging—even then—studies of change and of social, political, and economic conditions for both scientific and practical reasons. The image of him as a fact collector, merely interested in "getting all the old customs before they died out," is quite incorrect. He always had in mind the wider implications of his studies, and this proposal was not an exception but a part of his program for a scientific anthropology in the service of mankind. This was in keeping both with his German liberal activist inheritance and with the sentiments common in the contemporary Progressive Era in America.
Franz Boas’s Professional Activities, 1896–1914

In 1896, Franz Boas established the anthropology department at Columbia University and taught graduate students including A. L. Kroeber, Robert H. Lowie, Edward Sapir, William Jones (a Mesquakie [Fox] Indian), Alexander Goldenweiser, Paul Radin, and quite a few undergraduate women at Barnard College. (His better known women graduate students, like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Gladys Reichard, Ruth Bunzel, Esther Goldfrank, and May Edel, did not enter Columbia until some years later.) He led a major effort to train students and send them out to study American Indian languages and cultures, while he carried out ethnographic fieldwork and publication himself, primarily, but not only, about the Kwakiutl. He was editor of and the driving force behind the Journal of American Folklore from 1908 to 1924, and of Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology from 1910 through the 1930s.

Boas organized and coordinated the research and publication of the massive Jesup North Pacific Expedition, a project that involved many scholars in the study of peoples on both sides of the Bering Straits (Boas 1903). The results constitute much of the basis for our ethnographic knowledge of Siberia as well as of the Northwest Coast of North America and Alaska. He worked on the ethnographic exhibits of the American Museum of Natural History, above all preparing the magnificent Northwest Coast hall. He served as active editor of several journals and tried to develop both “a Great Oriental School” for the study of Asian cultures and the International School of American Archaeology and Ethnology in Mexico (Godoy 1977). And, as always, he was constantly occupied in the search for the funds to support his own and his students’ and collaborators’ research and publication. The need to beg for money—which bothered him dreadfully—did not end until the day he died.

In November 1902, he wrote to Columbia’s president, Nicholas Murray Butler, recommending the establishment of an undergraduate program of anthropology “particularly in connection with the teaching of history and the social sciences. It is perhaps the best means of opening the eyes of students to what is valuable in foreign cultures, and thus to develop a juster appreciation of foreign nations and to bring out those elements in our own civilization which are common to all mankind” (Stocking 1974:291). This sounds very much like the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s “Global Cultures” program, established just 90 years later.

The Race Problem and the African American Past

Shortly after the turn of the century, Boas became more directly involved with “the race problem” by contributing actively and directly to the efforts of W. E. B. DuBois and other African American leaders. Responding to Marshall Hyatt’s claim (see note 3), Vernon Williams (1996) writes:

Yet Boas’s correspondence with leading African American intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Alain L. Locke, George E. Haynes, Abram Harris, Charles S. Johnson, Monroe N. Work, Charles H. Thompson, and Zora Neale Hurston reveals that he not only displayed an astonishing degree of real empathy with the plight of African American intellectuals and the black masses but also performed such practical functions as assisting them in obtaining jobs and foundation support, fighting for academic freedom, and nurturing studies of African American history and life in the social sciences. [p. 37]

On May 31, 1906, at the invitation of DuBois, Boas delivered the commencement address at the all black Atlanta University and spoke about the African background of African Americans. In this upbeat talk he urged his listeners to take heart from the knowledge that “the Negro race had contributed its liberal share” to the development of human culture and that the history and ethnography of Africa gave ample evidence of the skill, creativity, and ambition of their ancestors and kin. He spoke of the political and artistic skill of the peoples of West Africa, of the great markets there, and of the energy of African kings. “If, therefore, it is claimed that your race is doomed to economic inferiority, you may confidently look to the home of your ancestors and say, that you have set out to recover for the colored people the strength that was theirs before they set foot on this continent” (Stocking 1974:313).

W. E. B. DuBois, a towering political and intellectual figure in American Negro life from the 1890s until his death in 1963, wrote, “Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching history in 1906 and said to a graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted” (DuBois 1939:vi).

DuBois had received his Ph.D. from Harvard, where he had studied with William James and other greats; he had done graduate work in Germany and had published his own research on American Negroes, but this was the first time he was exposed to such a view of Africa and its connection to the American Negro. He soon began studying and writing about Africa himself and became a leading proponent of Pan-Africanism.

Boas became deeply involved in the NAACP in its early years, and when DuBois published the second number of the NAACP’s new journal, The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races, Franz Boas contributed the lead article: “The Real Race Problem” (1910). Boas wrote and spoke out on this topic over and over again for the rest of his life, and he encouraged the study of both African and American
Negro culture. He envisioned and worked for an *Encyclopedia of the Negro Race*, an African institute and African museum (combining public exhibits with scholarly research on Africa and African Americans [Beardsley 1973: 60]), and “the adoption of a ‘black studies’ curriculum at Columbia” (Hyatt 1990:96). He was involved with G. Carter Woodson of Howard University and his Center for the Study of Negro Life and History, stimulating and trying to fund research, and supporting and training Negro scholars such as Alain Locke, Arthur Huff Fauset, Abram Harris, and James F. King. (For fuller accounts of Franz Boas’s many activities in the struggle against anti-black racism and for the improvement of the situation of African Americans, see Baker 1998; Hyatt 1990; Williams 1996. See Willis 1975 on Boas and Negro folklore, and Hutchinson 1995 on Boas, Herskovits, and the Harlem Renaissance.)

Boas’s students included Herskovits, whose contributions to the study of the “New World Negro” as well as to African studies in America are extraordinary; Zora Neale Hurston, whose interest in southern Negro culture was fostered and partly funded and directed by Boas and his other students; David Efron, whose study *Gesture, Race and Culture* (1941) demonstrated the cultural and class basis of gestures; and Otto Klineberg, a social psychologist whose work on the limitations of intelligence testing, with its built-in cultural biases, should be far better known today. Klineberg’s work, inspired and directed by Boas, is of central importance because it forms the experimental basis for the claim that intelligence testing is culturally biased and a poor indicator of group differences—still a central issue. *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) represents precisely the sort of ideas that Boas fought hardest against. That book exists not because of anything Boas did but because the lessons that he and his collaborators taught us have been forgotten (Boas 1931; Klineberg 1935).

The “race problem” involved more than blacks and Indians, however. Prejudice was directed toward immigrants from everywhere but northwest Europe, especially against those from southern and eastern Europe and Asia. The so-called nativist movement became a central issue in American life in this period, as prominent “Anglo-Saxon” writers and political figures wrote about Anglo-Saxon superiority and the imminent demise of “the great race” if these “lesser breeds” were to continue flooding America’s shores. Boas contested these ideas in the press and on the speaker’s stand. He questioned the premises and promises of eugenics, another major enthusiasm of the time (Boas 1917a).

The problem of racism and prejudice remained among Boas’s central concerns all his life, until the moment of his death. Paul Rivet, the French anthropologist who was being honored at the luncheon at which Boas died, reports that his last words were: “One must never tire of repeating that racism is a monstrous error or an impudent lie” (1943: 313).

It is important to stress, contrary to current myth, that in his battle against the then-current concepts of race and biological determinism Boas never substituted “ethnic group” or “culture” for “race.” He attacked racism on many fronts, but never in a way that suggests that culture has the quality of permanence that had previously been ascribed to “race.” One of his cardinal principles, which he constantly preached, was to separate the biological from the cultural and both from language, and to note that each of these is a different realm that operates independently and with its own rules. He also repeatedly stressed the *variability* and *changeability* inherent in these phenomena. He was firmly and fundamentally against what today are called “essentializing” and “totalizing,” always emphasizing the individual and variability within groups. He held to this point of view whether he was dealing with biology, culture, or politics (Liss 1997; Stern 1959:238).

### The Great War of 1914–18

The period of World War I was a time of controversy in intellectual and politically liberal circles in the United States, and it was a source of great distress for Boas for many reasons.

1. He was normally against war unless it was in self-defense or in defense of a powerful principle. In this case he was convinced that the war was due to nationalism and superpatriotism, attitudes he hated, as well as to greed and pride. (See his “Patriotism” 1917b:156–158; letter to Ernst, 7/29/17; Hyatt 1990:126.)

2. He disapproved of the effect the war was having on American democracy and condemned the xenophobia that the war had unleashed in America against Germans and German culture. Although he had become an American, he still loved and respected what he saw as the positive things in the German intellectual and scientific traditions. There were serious attacks on freedom of speech that affected his friends and colleagues in addition to offending his deepest principles.

3. He feared the effect of the war on German society: “He predicted that a German defeat would unleash a hatred capable of stirring up ‘her nationalism for centuries to come,’ ” while “a victory would create an arrogance that would be equally damaging.” (Hyatt 1990:122, after Rohner 1969:271)

4. He was disturbed by the destruction in Europe, both from deaths due to fighting and from malnutrition, dislocation, and poverty. He was concerned about the disability of Europeans to pursue science and learning, and he still had family and friends in Germany.

5. His two sons were eligible for the draft.

Boas, as always, was very vocal about these matters. Although he was in an exposed position as an immigrant German and a Jew in a time of xenophobia, from 1914 until
American entry into the war in 1917 he wrote numerous articles and gave speeches against American involvement (Boas 1945). Once the United States entered the war he stopped his public pronouncements, but he remained deeply involved in the causes of people who had been punished for speaking out.

He fought battles for two colleagues who were accused of disloyalty and were removed from their jobs. One was Leo J. Frachtenberg, a linguist who got his Ph.D. under Boas and worked on Indian languages for the Bureau of American Ethnology. Frachtenberg was summarily dismissed in late 1917 on the grounds that he had made "utterances derogatory to the Government of the United States," and Boas spent a great deal of time and effort trying to get him reinstated. "I am not a bit pleased with the way Frachtenberg falls all over himself to prove his loyalty, but that is not the point" (letter to Lowie, 12/3/17). On December 26, 1917, Boas wrote to his son, Ernst, "I have mobilized the Association of Professors, the Evening Post, 3 senators, Keppel in the War Department. I hope this idiotic nonsense will be stopped for once" (cf. Hyatt 1990:128).

The second case involved James McKeen Cattell, one of the leaders of American psychology and a long-time colleague of Boas at Columbia (and his superior at Science in 1887–88). Cattell, very much against the war and very outspoken, had written to the members of the Congress urging them to defy Wilson and "to support a measure against conscripts to fight in Europe against their will" (Cattell quoted in Hyatt 1990:127).

Columbia's imperious president, Nicholas Murray Butler, saw this as an opportunity "to rid himself of an implacable enemy" (Hyatt 1990:127), so he and the board of trustees tried to dismiss Cattell from Columbia. Boas led the battle to support him, and he broadened his resistance into a more general confrontation with Butler's high-handed administration. He attacked what he saw as the loss of freedom of speech and of consideration of the faculty's opinions, and he led a movement to develop new guarantees of faculty governance at Columbia. 8

These don't exhaust Boas's wartime activities by any means. Among other things, he campaigned on behalf of European scholars who were adversely affected by the war, especially for German and Austrian anthropologists who had been caught on the wrong side of the lines and were interned. 9 And after the war he led efforts to support art and science in Germany and Austria, which included collecting books for libraries in those countries and getting food relief to Vienna. At first he worked through the Germanist Society, of which he was the founder, and then he helped establish the Emergency Society in Aid of European Science and Art.

On January 30, 1922, Boas wrote to W. H. R. Rivers, one of Britain's leading anthropologists and a physician, suggesting a plan for a massive study of the problem of seriously inadequate nourishment and increased morbidity and mortality among the populations of Central and Eastern Europe. He hoped that Rivers could get the support of the Royal Society for a study of "pathological conditions, actual food amounts, medical observations [bones, tuberculosis, growth]," of the relations between social conditions and nourishment, and of growth and physiological and psychological function. Noting that the "after effects of this period of partial starvation will undoubtedly be felt for many years," he urged that this study be done for practical purposes, for prevention and improvement of current conditions, and for basic scientific understanding of such problems.

He had earlier urged Charles B. Davenport to join him in an effort to get funding for a major study of U.S. army soldiers before they were discharged, in an effort to test questions of heredity versus environment. 20 Although Davenport was a leading proponent of eugenics and racial determinism, he was one of the major figures in the organization and funding of American biology, and Boas had to try to cooperate with him.

Boas's involvement in all of these projects should help dispel the myth that Boas saw anthropology as just the study of "primitives," of languages and cultures in danger of extinction, of the quaint and exotic, "the Other."

Once the war was over, he sent a letter to The Nation publicly denouncing the action of the War Department and four individual anthropologists who went to Mexico to engage in espionage using the cover of their science (Boas 1919a). John Dewey advised him not to send the letter on the grounds that he would be suspect because of his German origins and this might lessen his usefulness for good causes in the future (3/9/17). This act was costly to Boas, as he expected; he felt impelled to resign from the National Research Council and suffered reprisals from the American Anthropological Association and the Bureau of American Ethnology as well (Hyatt 1990:131–134; Stocking 1968: 270–307). Butler retaliated by firing Goldenweiser and refusing to hire another anthropologist. But Boas had insisted on acting on his principles.

Although he vehemently opposed World War I, he was understanding and humble in his attitude to those who went to war. Boas's son Ernst, who later became a prominent physician, enlisted as a medical officer when he realized that he might be drafted. The letters that Boas wrote to him are directed against the war and the stupidity of politics, but they are understanding of Ernst and his dilemma.

July 24, 1917

I have no right to criticize you and can understand your decision. But I am sorry that you yielded to torturing uncertainty and the pressure of circumstances, and thru your voluntary entry into the army have given your silent approval to the war. It is not a question [it goes without saying?] that your army service will bring us woe-some times, in this period of universal torture and cares. My dear boy, no matter what you do, my best wishes go with you.
Next came the problem of Heine, his younger son. August 15, 1918—

Heine is naturally all wrought up [about the draft]. I believe his attitude is determined by the fact that he does not want to be a coward, and that he will therefore seek the service that he most fears. I shall try to convince him that it takes more courage to act right than to appear courageous. Whether that will help is another matter. If my father had tried to persuade me in this manner when I was young I would not have followed his advice. If I can convince him I should like to try to get him in the ambulance service. You are all wrong when you say that it makes no difference whether one kills oneself or whether others do it. You would speak differently if you had thrust a bayonet into the abdomen of a man who also just does that that he is compelled to do.

There is a well-known tale among anthropologists that holds that Franz Boas was so upset when Ralph Linton, then a graduate student, returned after the war in an army uniform that Boas threw him out of the department and told him that he would never get a degree at Columbia. But their correspondence gives a different picture of their relationship during and after the war:

September 11, 1917—Linton's first letter in the correspondence file is on the letterhead of the Army and Navy Young Men's Christian Association (featuring a flag, the slogan "With the Colors," and the heading "War Work Council"). He begins by saying that he knows his wife has become increasingly critical of imperialism and colonialism, including the American imperialist venture in the Philippines and Latin America. In 1919 he attacked colonialism and the treatment of native peoples in The Nation, writing, among other things,

Any policy that increases production of valuable raw products by exploitation of the country without regard to the future, or that destroys the basis of the industrial and social life of the natives, must be condemned. . . . It is obvious that [different] policies will never be introduced so long as colonies and their inhabitants are considered as the property of colonial powers that exploit the land and utilize its inhabitants for their own economic purposes and for the fighting of their battles. [1919b:249]

In a letter to Ernst on this topic he added, "The only hope for a better world lies in the submerged millions and they will come in to their own. It is difficult to speak temperamently with all the hypocritical phrases that are to cover up the game of grab" (5/4/19).

Both the political situation and Boas’s personal life grew darker in the 1930s. He was almost 80 and had lost his daughter Gertrude to polio in 1924, his son Heine in a railroad accident in 1925, and Marie, his beloved wife of 42 years, to a hit and run driver in 1929. He had had heart attacks and ulcers. An operation to remove a cancerous growth from a nerve in his face years earlier had left him with some contortion of his face and difficulty pronouncing certain sounds, which was particularly difficult for a frequent public speaker and a linguist who worked with phonetics.

Despite these troubles, the political and economic circumstances of the Great Depression and the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe led him to speak out more frequently, giving speeches and writing in left and liberal periodicals about racism, chauvinism, attempts to limit freedom of inquiry and speech, about economic inequality and unequal educational opportunities. Here is an excerpt from a 1940 piece:

The undernourished, ill-clad child of the slums, the isolated child in a remote valley, the Negro child in the South is not in a position to develop freely the resources that lie in his mind and body. The communities to which such children belong are so poor that they cannot give adequate help, even if they knew how to do it. Without federal help this situation can never be remedied. Just as little as the needs for an adequate health...
service can be met without federal help can our fundamental educational needs be met by the inadequate resources of local communities. [1940b:189]

Nor did he only speak of these things in lofty terms. In addition to active campaigning for child welfare, he contributed to institutions himself and sought the contributions of wealthy people (letter to Mrs. Dwight Morrow 1/17/33).

In addition to his many political and public service activities, he continued a remarkable pace of research, writing, editing, and publishing. His last major publication projects included General Anthropology (editor and major contributor), 1938c, the editing and organization of many of his major papers as Race, Language, and Culture, 1940a; A Dakota Grammar, with Ella Deloria, 1941; Kwakiutl Tales (posthumous 1943); and he was working on a volume to be called Kwakiutl Ethnography when he died.

He started to combat Nazism and all it stood for quite early. He fought against their racial ideas (e.g., Barkan 1988; Kuznick 1987) for freedom of speech in Germany, and once again he worked on behalf of European scientists, artists, and others in need of asylum and work. His correspondence of the 1930s contains many requests to chairs and administrators to consider hiring this one, or to bring that one to campus for a series of lectures. He wrote on behalf of Wieschoff—the German Africanist who was dismissed from his post in Germany because his wife was Jewish—and Paul Rivet, Julius Lips, Roman Jakobson, Paul Kirchhoff, and Rudolph Kayser, Einstein’s son-in-law (in German literature). When a Cuban professor was jailed by the dictator Fulgencio Batista, Boas wrote to a leading Latin Americanist, Carleton Beals, recommending action. Despite his complaints that he had no energy, he seems indefatigable in his political activities—writing letters, attending meetings, and joining (and organizing) left-liberal organizations. Columbia graduate students of the time tell of going along to protect him when he went off to argue with American Nazis and others (Ebihara, on Jane R. Hanks, 1988; Goldfrank 1978; Mead 1959).

In a long letter to Ruth Benedict, after giving his latest reading of Hitler, Stalin, and the situation in Europe in October 1939, he writes,

I am more interested in our own civil liberties and, as you know, I am in that fight. Just now we are attacking the Chamber [of Commerce] of the State of New York, who want to see our free high schools chopped off, religion introduced, etc. I wish I had more strength, but I cannot undertake any work that requires physical strength. My heart simply won’t stand it. [Boas quoted in Mead 1959:413 ff.]

Here is a brief sample of his activities during his last years:

He was a founder of the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom, which actively fought racial discrimination and the investigation and intimidation of teachers in colleges and high schools (6/4/42, to John Davies). Among other battles, the Committee took on the Dies Committee, forerunner of the House Un-American Activities Committee. He fought for the ending of the poll tax laws that made it difficult or impossible for Negroes (blacks) to vote in many southern states, and he wrote to chide senators who failed to vote. He lent his name and contributed money to the Scottsboro defense. He was a member of the board of the Council on African Affairs, together with Paul Robeson, Ralph Bunche, and Max Yergan. He hoped that their research would be directed to the aim of getting the colonies out of the control of imperial rulers. And every day’s mail brought new requests for help from private individuals and leaders of political and charitable organizations.

When a biology teacher at the Bronx High School of Science wrote to Boas telling him that their biology textbook contained “a drawing showing marked differences between the chromosomes of Negroes and White men,” Boas wrote to Browder, who was in the Atlanta Penitentiary, that he had written to the geneticist L. C. Dunn, and then wrote to complain to the publisher and the superintendent of schools, and notified Walter White, the president of the NAACP.

On April 4, 1942, the managing editor of The Jewish Survey asked for a short article from him condemning the “Jew-baiting” of Father Coughlin, and calling for the banning of his magazine, Social Justice. Boas replied, “In my opinion the only kind of protest that means anything is to attack the whole attitude of races toward one another. If you want a note in which I accuse at the same time the Jews for their anti-Negro attitude I will write it.” (How does that square with the accusation that Boas’s attack on anti-black prejudice was a cover for a defense of Jews?)

He campaigned for the freedom of the jailed leader of the American Communist Party, Earl Browder. Although not a Marxist himself, during this period he devoted much of his time and energy to political causes associated with the far left (Goldfrank 1978:123 ff.; Stern 1959:239–241). He wrote to Browder, who was in the Atlanta Penitentiary, “However much I may disagree with the methods of your party and the demand for obedience of party members, I recognize that the final ideal of your party agrees with this lofty ideal,” that is, “they envisage a group consciousness that must embrace humankind as a whole and forbid group conflict” (5/17/41). He was impressed with the fact that many of the young people he had met “who profess to be Communists . . . are attracted by the ideas of equality of all members of mankind.” If Franz Boas was politically naive, it was a naivete of the left, not the right or the center.

In the light of all this I find it difficult to understand how Julia Liss can write, “What Boas did not address were the systems of power over which even his science could not rise” (1995:130).
The Political and the Personal

Many a great public figure who fights for all the right causes turns out to be more of a humanitarian in public than in private, to "love man in general more than in the particular." (See, for example, Ray Monk's biography of Bertrand Russell [1996].) This was far from the case with Franz Boas. Here are four examples of the manner in which he implemented his beliefs at the individual level.22

Dr. Albert Gatschet was a linguist who worked on Indian languages and ethnology for the Bureau of American Ethnology. As he aged he developed severe mental problems, and by 1905 he was unable to function. He was given leave but without pay, leaving his wife and child with no means of support. Boas was outraged and "petitioned members of the Smithsonian, the Carnegie Institute, and Congress for redress" (Hyatt 1990:76). As a result of Boas's efforts, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching granted him $1,000 per annum. He died a year later, however.

Herman K. Haeberlin came from Germany to study anthropology with Boas. He was a brilliant student and went to work among the pueblos first, then among the Snohomish of the Northwest Coast. He had started publishing excellent work, but he had diabetes and became increasing ill. Boas arranged for his care, helped pay for it, and evidently took on responsibility in loco parentis. Unfortunately Haeberlin died from acidosis in 1918 at the age of 26.

Alexander Goldenweiser was an early student of Boas, very brilliant but very difficult—undisciplined and self-indulgent. Much of their correspondence revolves around Boas's attempts to find research funding and teaching positions for Goldenweiser, or helping him out of trouble. Goldenweiser drank too much, and he fell in love with women more than was wise or very nice. Boas usually put up with his problems, but when Goldenweiser left his wife for another woman ("a deep, tried, and unslakable emotion that has come into my life—my love for Miss...") and refused to contribute to the maintenance of his wife and child, Boas put his foot down. When Goldenweiser wrote yet again asking for work or research money, Boas responded, "You should, through your lawyer, ask for a judgement against yourself which would bind you to such financial support... [for his wife and child]. It is the very least that you can do on behalf of your child." He tells him to stay out of New York in order to avoid conflict with his ex-wife. "If you will accept this plan please write me. If not, I am sorry I shall not do anything further in regard to your case. I think your whole future depends on the question whether you can make up your mind to accept obligations that any decent man has and live accordingly." Goldenweiser's telegram reads, "Accept your message in spirit and in letter..." (5/27/26–7/2/26).

Ella Deloria has been justly rediscovered (as Zora Neale Hurston has) many years after her death. But Boas knew how good she was when he first met her in 1915. He hired her to work with him and his students translating Lakota texts in one of his courses. (It was her first paying job, as she later reminded Boas.) Boas contacted her in 1926 and asked if she would be interested in working with him on the Dakota language. Their collaboration and correspondence continued from that time until he died. He encouraged her, he found money for her, and he supported her work in the field and for her stays in New York, where she could write up her material with more scholarly resources than she had in Kansas. She also taught some courses at Columbia (Medicine 1980, 1999; Schildkrout 1989:553).

In 1935 and 1936, Boas urged Ella Deloria to come to New York for work, and from her letters to him it seems clear that she really wanted to. She kept setting dates to come but then would write to postpone her trip. Finally she wrote that she could not come because of her responsibility to her family, especially her sister, who needed her. Based on this incident, Janet Finn accuses Boas of cultural insensitivity: he was pressuring her to come to New York, putting her in a difficult position when she could not and would not leave her family (1995:136–139). But it is clear that she hadn't told him of those obligations earlier nor was she generally averse to travel and residence away from her family. She had studied at Oberlin College in Ohio and Columbia Teachers College in New York and had happily stayed at Columbia on several occasions.23

Finn assumes that Boas, as a white man, wouldn't understand the power of kinship obligations that kept Ella Deloria close to her family. But a letter that he wrote to his sister Toni, when she was ashamed to accept his help when she needed it, gives a different picture. He wrote,

It depends entirely upon how strongly one feels about family solidarity which stems from a person's love for his parents, his attachment to common childhood experiences, his attitudes toward life and his character traits which were implanted in him as well as in all the other members of the family. If the feeling of belonging together is still strong within us and if it has not been killed by outside circumstances which have forced us into [other] paths then I can not understand your feelings [of unwillingness to accept help]. [10/29/06]

In fact, in his graduate student days Boas had declined an opportunity to work at the laboratory of Hermann von Helmholtz, the leader in the field of psychophysics, in order to remain closer to Toni at a time when she was quite ill (Cole 1999:51). Janet Finn, working with a cultural stereotype of Boas, makes assumptions about him that, although fashionable, are probably untrue. Boas had his own powerful sense of family loyalty, and there is every reason to believe that he understood the importance of kinship and community to Indian people as well.

Finn also writes, "While Deloria's labor supported Boas's ethnographic agenda, her role as informant seemed to be valued more than her role as a scholar" (p. 137). I can
find no evidence for this. One merely needs to read the glowing letter that he wrote for her in 1937 to see his respect for her. "She has a thorough grasp of the grammar and spirit of the language . . . and she is thoroughly conversant not only with the forms but also with the very intricate psychological background . . . . Her knowledge of the subject is unique" (Deloria 1944: xiv). Robert H. Lowie, Boas’s eminent former student, expressed his admiration for Ella Deloria’s fieldwork and wrote to Boas telling him that he was going to base his graduate seminar on her Dakota Texts (2/27/35).

On another occasion (7/16/34) Boas wrote to John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, recommending Deloria as one of those “qualified individuals who might be of assistance in the work of rehabilitating Indian tribal organization and social life.” He notes that she “has an excellent grasp of the needs of the situation” and that a report submitted to Collier by one of Boas’s former Ph.D. students was merely a repetition of what Miss Deloria had told her. Boas recognized quality where he found it.

But suppose Franz Boas had been insensitive at some point in his long relationship with Ella Deloria as Janet Finn claims. Is this worth noting to the exclusion of the fact that as a result of Boas’s training, encouragement, and advice, and his commissions and financial support, she was able to develop a career that gave her well-deserved pride and satisfaction and brought her considerable honor? She published one classic linguistic work in her own name (Dakota Texts [1932]) and was coauthor with Boas of another, A Dakota Grammar (1941), a work that some linguists consider to be the finest grammar of an American Indian language. (“So many people are asking about our grammar, I feel very proud to be your co-author,” wrote Deloria, 7/15/41.) From the work that she did with Boas she gained the confidence, experience, contacts, and recommendations that helped her to write and publish other works and to obtain speaking engagements and positions that gave her a more secure and more honored life. Her last letters to Boas are full of the satisfaction she felt as a result of her researches, her increasing visibility, and her contacts and sense of collegiality with other anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict, Edward Kennard, Otto Klineberg, Gladys Reichard, and Ruth Landes.

Ella Deloria wrote to Boas regarding a tribute to him that had appeared in the New York Times in 1939, “It is beautiful, isn’t it, but not a whit more than you deserve. Please allow me to add my feeble bit to the well merited praise, who have really known you rather better than many, through many years of profitable association with you. I would not trade the privilege of having known you, for anything I can think of” (7/17/39). She later wrote, “You have always been my best friend and have helped me to do what I wanted to do in the past; I think maybe you might be able to help me again, through your influence and advice” (6/17/41, emphasis added).

Perhaps we can deconstruct these texts and see her words as mere flattery and a sign of her dependence upon him, but this would probably do a grave injustice to Ella Deloria, her feelings, and the realities of her life story. In the absence of any other evidence, in the light of their long, mutually respectful and profitable collaboration, why search for hidden motives and misunderstandings that diminish both or either of them?

These four cases are just a few of the many that can be found in the massive correspondence that Boas left behind.24

Conclusions

Franz Boas was not an ethical relativist but believed in and spent his life working and fighting for certain values: equal opportunity for all, understanding and mutual appreciation among peoples, freedom of speech and inquiry. He thought that anthropology was the best instrument to use for these purposes and did not prostitute himself or his science in the pursuit of these ends but sought fearlessly to investigate the causes of sociocultural behavior. He was as farsighted and clear-eyed as anyone in his time, an opponent of racism, ethnocentrism, inequality, chauvinism, imperialism, war, censorship, and political cant and mind-fogging sloganeering. He was acutely aware of the causes and consequences of inequality and understood the material bases of much of it. The image of “Papa Franz” as nothing but a fact collector could not be further from the truth. (See Lewis 2001.)

It would be foolish to deny that others may pervert a person’s work or that one’s intentions may be irrelevant because one’s efforts may lead to very different results than those that were intended and desired. It is far-fetched, however, to argue that Franz Boas contributed to the development of “scientific racism” or to ethnic chauvinism, nationalism, or colonialism. Those who claim this bear a heavy burden of proof they are far from meeting. These were all well established before his time; his contribution was to fight them and to try to replace them with appreciation of “the Other.” He cannot be held accountable for the fact that these evils still exist, but there is a very strong case to be made that there is less of it because of his efforts.

The evidence indicates that Franz Boas was an outstanding and admirable human being, both in terms of what he attempted and what he achieved, in his values and the way in which he put them into practice. He was willing to bear great costs for his beliefs, even when these went against his personal, professional, and scientific interests. The record also shows that he dealt with his colleagues, students, and family in a deeply humane way. Although one may approve of much that a person does but profoundly disapprove of other aspects of that person’s life and work, we do not have to make that compromise in the case of Franz Boas. This is not to say that Boas cannot be legitimately
criticized for anything he ever did or said, but it is to argue against the too-easy attribution of guilt, especially in light of the major differences between the world of his early days and today.

Franz Boas both professed and acted upon the finest and highest ideals of his (and our) culture and time. These are: concern for the dominated and oppressed, respect for “others” as individuals as well as for other cultures; tolerance and humane dealing; and respect for the eternal quest for knowledge about ourselves and the world. Despite all the uncertainties and decenterings, the reversals and questionings of values of the current moment, at base, I believe most of us would still want to be judged by how well we served these interests.25

Notes

Acknowledgments. I owe a debt to the American Philosophical Society for an Andrew Mellon Resident Research Fellowship and for permission to publish material from their collections. I must also add personal thanks to Beth Carroll-Harrocks, Rob Cox, and Roy Goodman of the APS Library staff for their professional and friendly support. In addition I wish to thank Walter Goldschmidt, Dr. Norman F. Boas, Leonard B. Glick, Jay Miller, Amelia Schultz, John Landgraf, George Hutchinson, Michael C. Coleman, George M. Foster, Francis Schrag, Frank Salamone, Mitchell Hart, May Ebihara, and my fellow researchers at the APS, Sara Trechter, Kevin Dann, Nathaniel Comfort, and David Miller. As always, special gratitude is due my wife, Marcia.

1. “I must confess I often am annoyed with the young people who forget what they owe to us seniors, and then I get still more angry at myself that I am upset by it, for it is quite natural, and they should feel that they think and work for themselves” (letter to son Ernst, 4/13/18).

2. It is impossible to discuss the many problems with Willis’s article here, but one must record the fact that, with respect to these allegations, a quotation from Boas is misleading and reference to a letter in Rohner (1969) is irrelevant (p. 139).

3. It is interesting to contrast Willis’s anger in this piece with the understanding that he shows in a later article dealing with Boas’s lifelong efforts to support the study of African American folklore (1975). Willis would later offer sympathetic comments about Boas in the 1990 documentary film The Shackles of Tradition and was working on a biography of Boas at the time of his death. By then he had come to respect Boas greatly, according to Frank Salamone (personal communication).


4. For fuller responses to Visweswaran’s paper see Lewis (1998b) and Stassinos (1998).

5. The letter that Meisenhelder (1999:15) cites as proof of Hurston’s “posturing as a deferential disciple” (4/21/29) seems to be what one would expect from a 27-year-old neophyte who is asking advice from her advisor, especially an advisor who is the world’s leading authority on the topics she is asking about. Boas’s suggestions to her as to what to look for in the field (5/3/27), rather than evidence of “Boas’s control of Hurston’s work” (Meisenhelder 1999:201), are the suggestions that any good advisor might give to a young student. Indeed, this particular advice might have been quite useful for Hurston’s subsequent work because he urges her to pay less attention to the content of stories (many of which had been previously recorded) and more to diction, style, and performance. Boas wrote, “The methods of dancing, habitual movements in telling tales, or in ordinary conversation; all this is material that would be essentially new.” She closes her letters to Boas with “Most affectionately yours” (12/27/28) and “Love” (4/21/29)! Should these expressions be taken as prima facie evidence of her domination by Boas, or may we credit her agency in this matter?


7. Even George Stocking, who taught us about the problem of presentism (1968), falls prey to this tendency while discussing Boas’s 1942:110–113, distributing passing or failing marks to Boas based upon the political ideas of Stocking’s own world in 1979. How valid, one wonders, will these judgements sound in 2040? (In conclusion, however, Stocking offers an endorsement of Boas’s general standpoint similar to the one in this paper.)

8. Douglas Cole worked for many years to prepare the first of two projected volumes of Boas’s biography but unfortunately he died before it could be published. This valuable volume has been published posthumously, however (Cole 1999).


10. Edward Sapir and Ruth Benedict wanted to stop Margaret Mead from going to Samoa. Although Boas, too, had been concerned for her health and safety, he wrote to Ruth Benedict, “In my opinion an attempt to compel her now to give up the trip . . . would be disastrous. Besides it is entirely against my point of view to interfere in such a radical way with the future of a person for his or her own sake—unless there is actual disease that needs control” (Darnell 1990:186–187). His daughter Franziska told an interviewer that he had the same reaction to her desire to be an actor and dancer.
11. His mother established the first Froebel kindergarten in their town, Minden, Westphalia.

12. After Jacobi’s first two wives died, he married Mary Putnam, a physician, feminist, and pioneer activist in the consumer movement (Link 1949). She was a relative of the prominent anthropologist Frederic Ward Putnam, who became an early patron and friend of Boas. For an interesting account of the members of this group who were so important to Franz Boas, see Boas and Meyer (1999).

13. Bildung had long been a key concept for German intellectual humanists like Boas and his circle, from the time of Goethe and Herder on. It meant something like “the unhindered growth of the powers of the individual” (Diehl 1978:19; cf. Mosse 1985). Boas’s declaration of his aims to John Dewey (above) makes even more sense in the light of this doctrine (cf. Liss 1996).

14. According to Andrew Zimmerman (2001), the committee that evaluated Boas’s papers for his habilitation “neither welcomed his studies of the Inuit as important monographs on a previously neglected subject nor reacted against the challenge they posed to the ethnocentrism of the university. These academics simply could not comprehend the scholarly interest of Boas’s anthropology” (p. 45).

15. There is no full study yet of the development of Boas’s ideas about the nature of race and racial differences. He began his career at a time when “racial science” was overwhelmingly dominant, and he fought its influence by every means at his disposal, but in his early years he was certainly somewhat limited by the prevailing ideas and information in the field. (See, e.g., Vernon Williams’s [1996] discussion of Boas [1894b] and the problem of comparative brain size.) There is no room to consider the matter here, but if it is true that Boas never completely rejected the very notion of “race” as Ashley Montagu did in the 1940s, it is also true that Boas was Ashley Montagu’s mentor and inspiration on this topic.

16. Madison Grant, the author of the popular “nativist” book, The Passing of the Great Race (1916), complained to the biologist Charles B. Davenport, “I have been greatly disappointed in the failure of the American biologists to support me, as they all seem to be either afraid of Boas or else impregnated with socialism, but I have had unqualified endorsement and support from the foreign biologists, especially the English” (1917).

17. This account comes from Paul Rivet, the guest of honor at the lunch at which Boas died. Rivet reports that the next sentence, his last, was, “The Nazis themselves recently had to recognize the correctness of the facts that I had proclaimed regarding European immigrants in America.” Margaret Mead (1959:355) gives a somewhat different version that Esther Goldfrank sensibly disputes (1978:121–123).

18. In the Cattell battle and many others, Boas had the aid of his friend and supporter, Dr. Elsie Clews Parsons, an alumna of Barnard and a past trustee of Columbia, a woman of considerable wealth and position married to a Republican stalwart. She was also a radical feminist, a socialist, an enemy of convention, an indefatigable fieldworker, prolific author of works of ethnography and folklore, and a generous supporter of Boas and his students’ research and publication.

19. In one letter (4/12/15), he wrote to W. H. R. Rivers about the anthropologists Von Luschan, Penck, and Graebner, who were “guests of the British nation” while doing fieldwork in various parts of the British Empire. “I think you feel as we do, that these men who were guests should be sent home; and I want to ask you most urgently to do all in your power in London to obtain for Von Luschan and Mrs. Von Luschan safe-conduct through Copenhagen or Rotterdam.”

20. Contrary to Derek Freeman’s contention, Boas did not blindly insist that environment was all. His researches in this area were always aimed at the understanding of both heredity and environment (Degler 1989:9–10; Tanner 1959).

21. Linton had been appointed “senior anthropologist” by the Columbia administration. Boas, Ruth Bunzel, and Ruth Benedict had wanted Benedict to have that position. There was an unpleasant rivalry between them. “[a]nd the war continued unabated until Linton left Columbia in 1946 to become Sterling Professor of Anthropology at Yale” (Goldfrank 1978:110–111). But accounts of the reactions of the Boasians to his appointment only speak of professional disagreements, not the alleged post-war incident (Caffrey 1989; Modell 1983).

22. Herskovits writes of “the two currents in Boas’s life, the personal and professional, which stand in such marked contrast—the first calm conventional, warm in human relations, the second turbulent, courageous, wherein Boas was the supreme individualist, who dominated the scene in which he for so many years played his role” (1953:13). Ruth Bunzel gives a more complicated picture of his personality (1962:5–10), and it is obvious that in this area of his life as in every other there is a great deal to be investigated. Boas’s official correspondence contains many indications of warm relations with others, especially with his former women students (usually indicating close relations with his wife and children as well) and with certain male colleagues (e.g., McGee, Tozzer, Jastrow).

23. By 1938 she had gained respect as an expert on Indian culture and was made a member of the Phelps-Stokes project to study the situation of the Navajos. By the 1940s she had won recognition as a creative organizer of Indian pageants and fairs and was invited many places to talk and organize. Increasingly she received research grants and challenging positions, and she wrote about Dakota culture in addition to her continuing linguistic work. She gained considerable prominence and seems to have enjoyed it.

24. Here is one more: In the summer of 1913, when she was a student at the Indian school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Rose Whipper (of the Sioux nation) worked for the Boas family, helping care for their children. She and Boas maintained an intermittent correspondence from then until 1936. As far as I can tell, Boas had no “ethnographic agenda”22; rather, Rose Whipper was frequently in need, and Boas responded to her with respectful and friendly advice and material help, once writing to Ella Deloria to try to locate her when he had heard that Rose might be in need.

25. It is worth repeating Michel de Montaigne’s observation, made about 1580:

I see most of the wits of my time using their ingenuity to obscure the glory of the beautiful and noble actions of antiquity, giving them some vile interpretation and conjuring up vain occasions and causes for them. What great subtility! Give me the most excellent and purest action and I will
plausibly supply fifty vicious motives for it. God knows what a variety of interpretations may be placed on our inward will, for anyone who wants to elaborate them. [1948: 170]

**Note on Archival Sources**

Unless otherwise indicated, the letters cited in the text are in the American Philosophical Society Library, from the Franz Boas collection, B/B61.

**References Cited**

Baker, Lee D.


Barkan, Elazar


Beardsley, Edward H.


Berman, Judith


Bloom, Allen


Boas, Franz


1919a Scientists as Spies. The Nation 109:797.


1938a An Anthropologist’s Credo. The Nation 147:201–204.


1940a Race, Language and Culture. New York: Macmillan.


1949a Scientists as Spies. The Nation 109:797.


1954a An Anthropologist’s Credo. The Nation 147:201–204.


1966a Scientists as Spies. The Nation 109:797.


Cole, Douglas
1983 “The Value of a Person Lies in His Herzensbildung”;
Franz Boas’s Baffin Island Letter-Diary, 1883–1884. In
Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork.
Wisconsin Press.
1999 Franz Boas: The Early Years, 1858–1906. Seattle: Uni-
versity of Washington Press.

Darnell, Regna
Berkeley: University of California Press.

Degler, Carl N.
1989 Culture versus Biology in the Thought of Franz Boas and
Alfred L. Kroeber. German Historical Institute (Washington,
1991 In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of
Darwinism in American Social Thought. New York: Oxford
University Press.

Deloria, Ella
1932 Dakota Texts, by Ella Deloria. Publications of the
Steckert.
1944 Speaking of Indians. New York: Friendship Press. Re-

DeMallie, Raymond J.
1999 “George Sword Wrote These”: Lakota Culture as Lakota
Text. In Theorizing the Americanist Tradition. Lisa P. Valen-
tine and Regna Darnell, eds. Pp. 245–258. Toronto: Uni-
versity of Toronto Press.

Diehl, Carl
1978 Americans and German Scholarship 1770–1870. New
Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

D’Souza, Dinesh
1995 The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Soci-

DuBois, W. E. B.

Ehnbright, May
1988 Jane Richardson Hanks. In Women Anthropologists: A
York: Greenwood.

Efron, David
1941 Gesture and Environment. New York: King’s Crown
Press. Reprint, Gesture, Race and Culture. The Hague: Mout-
ton, 1972.

Finn, Janet
1995 Ella Cara Deloria and Mourning Dove: Writing for Cult-
ures. Writing against the Grain. In Women Writing Culture.
Berkeley: University of California Press.

Glick, Leonar d B.
1982 Types Distinct from Our Own: Franz Boas on Jewish

Godoy, Ricardo
1977 Franz Boas and His Plans for an International School of
American Archeology and Ethnology in Mexico. Journal of

Goldfrank, Esther S.
1978 Notes on an Undirected Life: As One Anthropologist
Tells It. Queens College Publications in Anthropology, 3.
Flushing, NY: Queens College Press.

Goldschmidt, Walter, ed.
1959 The Anthropology of Franz Boas: Essays on the Centen-
nial of His Birth. Memoirs of the American Anthropological
Association, 89. San Francisco: American Anthropological
Association.

Grant, Madison
1917 Letter to Charles B. Davenport. February 16, 1917. Daven-
port Papers (B/D27). American Philosophical Society Li-
brary.

Harris, Marvin
1968 The Rise of Anthropological Theory. New York: Crow-
well.

Herzstein, Richard J., and Charles Murray

Herskovits, Melville J.
York: Charles Scribner’s.

Hill, Lynda Marion
1996 Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale. Wash-
ington, DC: Howard University Press.

Holloway, Karla F. C.
1987 The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale
Hurston. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Hurston, Zora Neale
1942 Dust Tracks on a Road. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.

Hutchinson, George
1995 The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White. Cam-
bridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hyatt, Marshall
1989 The Dimensions of Franz Boas’s Thought on Environ-
ment and Culture: A Response to Carl N. Degler. In Culture
versus Biology in the Thought of Franz Boas and Alfred L.
Kroeber. Carl N. Degler. German Historical Institute (Wash-

1990 Franz Boas, Social Activist: The Dynamics of Ethnicity.
Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Hymes, Dell
1981 In Vain I Tried to Tell You. Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press.
1985 Language, Memory, and Selective Performance: Cul-
tee’s Salmon Myth as Twice Told to Boas. Journal of American
Folklore 98: 391–434.
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
1999b Boas on the Threshold of Ethnopoetics. In Theorizing
the Americanist Tradition. Lisa P. Valentine and Regna Darnell,

Hymes, Dell ed.

Jacknis, Ira
1996 The Ethnographic Object and the Object of Ethnology in
the Early Career of Franz Boas. In History of Anthropology,
vol. 8. Volksgeist as Method and Ethic. George W. Stocking
Klineberg, Otto
Kroeber, Alfred L., ed.
Krupat, Arnold
Kuznick, Peter J.
1987 Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists As Political Activists in 1930s America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lesser, Alexander
Leventhal, Harvey A.
Lewis, Herbert S.
Link, Eugene P.
Lionnet-McCumber, F.
Liss, Julia E.
Lubbock, John L.
Mead, Margaret
Medicine, Bea
Meisenhelder, Susan Edwards
Modell, Judith
Monk, Ray
Montaigne, Michel de
Mosse, George L.
Pittinger, Mark
Podesta, Guido A.
Ray, Verne F.
Rivet, Paul
Rohner, Ronald P., ed.
The Shackles of Tradition
Star, Alexander
Stassinos, Elizabeth
Schildkrout, Enid
1987 Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists As Political Activists in 1930s America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Theorizing the Americanist Tradition
Stern, Bernhard J.
Stocking, George W., Jr.


Stocking, George W., Jr., ed.


Tanner, J. M.


Visweswaran, Kamala


White, Leslie A.


Williams, Vernon J., Jr.


Willis, William S., Jr.


Zimmerman, Andrew
