

## **‘Gods of the Upper Air’ Review: You Got to Go There to Know There.**

Franz Boas's fieldwork upset old ideas about culture. He hated grand theories but his acolytes couldn't resist them.

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Charles King's lively, ambitious book makes a very large claim: that the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) inspired an "intellectual revolution" in the first half of the 20th century. The Boasians launched a scientific attack on "chauvinism and bigotry," Mr. King writes, which brought about "one of the great shifts of opinion in the history of science." It is thanks to them that racists may now feel ashamed of themselves, that no career is closed to women, and that gay individuals kiss each other goodbye on railway platforms. A stirring tale. But is it history or myth?

A professor of international affairs at Georgetown University, Mr. King reminds us that, as late as the 1930s, many educated and influential Americans and Europeans took it for granted that biology was destiny. History was a record of racial conflict. Public policy should be based on eugenics. But the author tells us that Boas demolished these old doctrines. He proved that race does not determine intelligence, talent, personality or morality. Nor are men and women programmed by nature to fulfill predestined mommy and daddy roles. It is our particular culture that make us what we are.

That is Mr. King's story, and it is a familiar narrative, routinely taught to first-year anthropology students in American universities. But it is much too simple. Boas did not invent a whole new theory of race and culture. He had been trained in the Berlin school of anthropology, and he passed on the Berlin doctrine to his students at Columbia University. Boas's early disciple Robert Lowie summed up the Berlin view of culture in two slogans. Cultures "develop mainly through the borrowings due to chance contact." Consequently, a civilization is a "planless hodgepodge . . . [a] thing of shreds and patches."

In Boas's view, the main task of the anthropologist was therefore the meticulous reconstruction of local histories. The time was not yet ripe for grand theories of human nature, race and cultural evolution. Indeed, the findings of field workers should be mobilized to demolish premature generalizations. Boas's own long-term research among the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia yielded over 5,000 pages documenting myths, customs and rituals, but added barely any commentary. When a leading British anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, challenged Boas to offer at least one generalization, after a lifetime of anthropological research, Boas replied, after some thought: "People don't use anything they haven't got."

Boas's austere message was certainly a hard sell: Some of his students worried that picking apart all the big ideas was not enough. "People do want to know why!" warned Alfred Kroeber, a student of Boas who himself became a noted anthropologist. And Boas, a German immigrant with a thick accent, his face marked by sabre scars from his dueling days in Heidelberg, was not a charismatic messenger—formal, tetchy and pedantic. The work of generalization and popularization fell to a formidable female duo, Ruth Benedict, Boas's second-in-command at Columbia, and Margaret Mead, who Mr. King describes as "one of America's greatest public scientists." These two brilliant and creative women turned out to be excellent propagandists, but soon they were changing Boas's message almost beyond recognition.

Mead's first book, "Coming of Age in Samoa," appeared in 1928, when she turned 27 years old, and was a masterpiece of popularization. She worked up her apprentice field study in American Samoa as a handbook for American teachers and parents. In America, Mead wrote, teenagers were guilt-ridden and sexually frustrated, and they were plagued by an identity crisis. Confronted with a hypermarket of choices, they had no idea who or what they would like to be when they grew up. So they screamed at their parents, banged their bedrooms doors and collapsed in floods of tears. Teenage girls in Samoa were much happier. They enjoyed sexual freedom. They were also secure, because they could look forward to living the same life as their own mothers. And so they passed from childhood to adulthood without any trauma.

The moral of the story was obvious. Adolescent crises were not caused by hormonal changes. Unhappy children were made unhappy by a dysfunctional culture. So far, so Boasian. Her publisher put a picture of a topless young woman on the cover, and "Coming of Age" became a best seller.

Ruth Benedict's "Patterns of Culture," published in 1934, was another publishing phenomenon. Mr. King writes that it "would become arguably the most cited and most taught work of anthropological grand theory ever." This was, however, a radical departure from the Boas paradigm. Boas abhorred grand theory, and he was set against romantic notions of organic, unified folk cultures. Yet this was precisely the view of culture that Benedict now championed. She also claimed that each culture cultivates its own sort of people and shapes their personalities to fit its own purposes. And Benedict made a further, even more daring leap. A culture was itself very like a personality—it might be puritanical or permissive, paranoid or trusting, rational or mystical.

In a glowing preface to "Patterns of Culture," Mead lauded Benedict's "view of human cultures as 'personality writ large' " (but she wrote privately to a lover: "Ruth's book is finished and isn't very good"). In 1935, Mead published another radical take on culture and personality, "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies." This gave an account of gender roles in three communities, strung along the

Sepik River in New Guinea, that she had studied in the field with her second husband, Reo Fortune.

In the first community, the Arapesh, men and women were alike nurturing and unaggressive, "feminine" to American eyes. (Fortune couldn't stand the men; Mead thought them all very boring.) The couple moved on to a very different community, the Mundugumor. Here men and women were hyper-aggressive, totally selfish and brutal to the children. (Fortune found the people unpleasant but perfectly natural; Mead thought them appalling, and she had a breakdown, which she blamed on the Mundugumor, and on Fortune.) In a third community, the Tchambuli, the men were arty, narcissistic, catty. They reminded Mead of suburban American housewives, and she told friends that they were more neurotic than any set of men she had ever come across. The women were more to her taste: co-operative, practical, no-nonsense business people. In their dances, women courted men who were fitted out as drag queens. Although men were nominally in control, Mead wrote, "the actual initiative and power is in the hands of the women." (Mead was charmed by all this, but Fortune found it very hard to deal with.)

Here was a wonderful natural experiment. It demonstrated that male and female roles were determined by culture, not by biology. But Mead had come to believe that neither culture nor biology was the true bedrock of human nature. Nor was personality simply shaped by culture, as Benedict had supposed. Rather, personality, or what Mead now called temperament, was the great invariant feature of human nature. There were only a limited range of temperaments, and she suspected that they were fixed by biology. They cropped up in every society, and if, by luck, one's personality meshed with the cultural pattern, one would be a happy and secure member of society. But a person whose nature did not fit the culture would become a rebel, an artist or a shaman—or, perhaps, succumb to mental illness.

This was all a long way from the Boasian orthodoxy, yet Mead was reluctant to admit that she and Benedict had parted ways with "Papa Franz." Her bland and evasive memoir, "Blackberry Winter," published in 1972, played down the extent of her own rebellion, and I think she would have welcomed Mr. King's presumption that she and Benedict were carrying forward the orthodox Boasian program. In the summer of 1976, I spent a week in New York, interviewing Mead for a BBC documentary on her work and life. She brushed aside my questions, preferring to quote almost verbatim from "Blackberry Winter" and recite, for the thousandth time, the origin story of her intellectual baptism by Boas and the epic of her two most famous field studies.

By that time, however, a backlash was building. A few years after her death, in 1978, Derek Freeman, a professor of anthropology in Canberra, Australia, published a savage critique of Mead's Samoan study. He claimed that she had twisted her findings to fit the Boas doctrine that culture trumps biology. More damagingly, he insinuated that her young Samoan informants had deliberately fooled her, boasting

about their sex lives, whereas in fact these adolescent girls were firmly controlled by their fathers and had to remain virgins until marriage. To top it off, Freeman trumpeted that he was, by rubbishing Mead's apprentice study, delivering a decisive blow against the whole edifice of cultural relativism.

Freeman was a cranky obsessive, and his attack on Mead's research was wildly overblown, but his claims were welcomed by some conservative intellectuals. In his blockbuster 1987 polemic, "The Closing of the American Mind," Allan Bloom took aim at the cultural relativists. Mead herself was a particular target. Bloom accused her of disrespect for American civilization, and also of being a "sexual adventurer." And that she was. Mr. King offers a striking image of Mead on her way to Samoa to begin her first field study: "She had left behind a husband in New York and a boyfriend in Chicago, and had spent the transcontinental train ride in the arms of a woman." That woman was Ruth Benedict. In the 1980s, a flood of biographies began to appear, with sensational accounts of her three marriages and a variety of heterosexual and lesbian partnerships. As it turned out, however, these revelations served to make Mead and Benedict interesting again. Free spirits and pioneering women scholars, they were recast as icons for a new feminist generation.

These two were not the only remarkable women in Boas's circle. Mr. King tracks Boas's "intellectual revolution" through the work of several female acolytes, and provides a particularly fascinating profile of Zora Neale Hurston. The daughter of a Baptist minister who was mayor of Eatonville, an all-black town in Florida, Hurston was encouraged by Boas to collect folk tales in the American South and the Caribbean. She went on to publish folklore collections and also several novels that featured zombies and voodoo, but she died in obscurity in 1960. The poet and novelist Alice Walker tracked down her archive and championed her work, and Hurston is now counted as a significant figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

Arguably, she was a more orthodox Boasian than Mead or Benedict, because what she took from Boas was not a big idea, as Mr. King implies, but rather a method. She summed this up in terms that many anthropologists will instantly recognize: "Just squat down a while, and after that things begin to happen." Or, more memorably, in the words of one of her fictional characters, "It's uh known fact, you got tuh go there tuh know there."

So is Mr. King's account history or myth? Like the Kwakiutl narratives collected by Boas in British Columbia, it is a bit of both.

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