

Social & cultural studies | *Book Review*

Lines of thought

Franz Boas: the man who opened up anthropology in America

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Franz Boas | © Alamy

IN THIS REVIEW

THE REINVENTION OF HUMANITY

A story of race, sex, gender and the discovery of culture
432pp. Bodley Head. £25.

CHARLES KING

The President of the United States was saying “America must be kept American”, emboldening white supremacists to blame darker-skinned immigrants for causing crime and taking working-class jobs. It was the 1920s, and the US was erecting barriers against immigration, with severe effects on those who were poor or classed as non-white. White patricians, feeling under threat from those who spoke foreign languages and clustered in tenements, rallied around a confident, energetic, mustachioed ideologue named Madison Grant, a wealthy New Yorker and close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. Grant’s book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) implausibly suggested that America had once been racially homogeneous but was becoming degraded by immigration – plunged into a chaotic, impoverished “racial abyss”. “Teutonics” or “Nordics” like him were being “replaced”, he warned, by “lower” races and would soon be “extinct”. Grant’s malevolent thesis that racial mixing posed a grave threat to white vitality was seized on by Hitler, who in 1925 wrote Grant a fan letter, praising the German translation of his book as “my Bible”.

Grant’s most troublesome critic was the anthropologist Franz Boas, an assimilated Jew who had immigrated to the US from Germany and taught at Columbia University. Boas regularly belittled Grant’s racial theories as “Nordic nonsense” and, in publication after publication, he upended the conceit that they had any basis in science. Grant’s book was “dogmatic” and “dangerous”, Boas wrote presciently in the *New Republic*. Its racial fear-mongering rested on fallacies, starting with the concept of race itself. Grant’s categories, which included Nordic, Mediterranean, Hindu, Negro and Jew, were ill-defined, overlapping, historically fickle and internally heterogeneous. They primarily reflected the habits of perception and classification that people learnt growing up. Race, Boas liked to point out, was very much in the eye of the beholder. Grant gave his “races” an aura of scientific authority by linking them with measured shapes of the skull, but Boas had previously led a study that

measured the heads of 17,000 Americans, and what it showed was that the “head form” of immigrants changed from one generation to the next with changed conditions of life: even the skull was subject to the influence of the environment.

Boas is an enormously important figure in the history of anthropology, but he has long been under-appreciated, and no holistic biography of him has yet been written. In part this is because he so directly tangled with the influential racists of his day like Grant, so that his critiques became arcane when those men were forgotten. Recently, however, Grant’s race-baiting ideas have become menacingly resurgent. In 2017 they were in the mouths of the neo-Nazis who marched in my hometown of [Charlottesville](#), Virginia, chanting “Jews will not replace us!” They have been echoed in panicked warnings about “white extinction” conspiracies posted on social media, sometimes by mass shooters, and in the slogans of national politicians. This renewed cross-fertilization of racist ideas around the globe, regrettably, makes Boas again relevant.

His scientific publications, though intellectually trail-blazing and voluminous, are drily written. He lacked eloquence, as he once lamented in a letter to his son. Yet the effect he had on those he taught was nothing short of astonishing. Without obvious charisma he generated excitement for multiple simultaneous, radical departures from conventional thinking, attracting remarkable students and setting them on the path to creating electrifying works. Some of them, such as Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston, are today much better known than their teacher. It is this story of hothouse creativity that Charles King tells, vividly and insightfully, in *The Reinvention of Humanity*. King calls his book a “collective biography” of Boas and the circle of brilliant, eccentric, mostly female intellectuals he drew together during the interwar years. It is a layered group portrait of a colourful cast of unconventional thinkers, set in a period with a powerful if unfortunate resonance to our own time.

Before Boas came on the scene, anthropology was a mostly amateur field, the pastime of gentleman collectors who expressed their sense of superiority over people who looked, spoke or acted differently from them by sorting them into grades or stages of race or civilization. Naturally, the theorist's own race, society, class and gender defined the top of the scale. Against this self-aggrandizement masquerading as science, Boas elaborated the concept that cultures were plural: they were different from one another and not always commensurate. Egyptians and Inuit, Chinese and Beninese, Papuans and Parisians had distinctive ways of seeing and being in the world, ideals they strove for, aesthetic values, historical experiences and ways of understanding themselves in relation to other peoples. Scientists were no different. They, too, were cultured beings, reared into specific local traditions of perception, thinking and feeling, and these were bound to involve emotional aversion and prejudice against the unfamiliar. Such reactions had to be examined as part of credible scientific study, especially of other people. To understand others, Boas taught, would require more than casual observation and reliance on second-hand reports by colonial travellers and missionaries. It would need first-hand acquaintance, competence in the language the people spoke, immersion in their environment, and adapting one's "own mind, so far as is feasible", to "follow [their] lines of thought" and "participate in [their] emotions".

Boas's story is often abbreviated into the appellation "father of American anthropology". But King wisely avoids this patriarchal trope, which might suggest a secure career of confident, white male privilege. In fact, Boas had only temporary jobs until he turned thirty-nine, and as a native German during a period when immigrants from Europe were stigmatized, he faced considerable prejudice. With the outbreak of the First World War, King explains, ethnic Germans became "one of the most feared, even hated, minorities" in the US, held under suspicion of being enemy sympathizers, spies or terrorist saboteurs. Boas didn't help his own cause by publicly supporting pacificism over militarism and expressing scepticism about patriotism. At Columbia, he was called "un-American", and the Board of Trustees

had his opinions investigated, whereupon he read a statement of principles in his classes that called for the protection of “non-conformist thought” and advised students to question the motives behind intellectual repression. Madison Grant’s allies worked hard to get him fired. Though the university allowed Boas to keep his job, it cut his salary and dealt a punishing budget cut to the Anthropology Department, moving it to small offices in an inconvenient location, downsizing its faculty to Boas alone, and restricting him from teaching undergraduates so as to prevent “Columbia men” from coming under his influence. But fortunately, he found a lifeline at Columbia’s women’s college, Barnard.

Boas had had Barnard students in his undergraduate classes since 1900, but only one had gone on to take a doctorate. After the war, however, more women were taking his classes: “All my best students are women”, he wrote to a friend in 1920. Around this time Boas became close to the pioneering feminist sociologist Elsie Clews Parsons, a Barnard graduate and Wall Street heiress who - after Columbia cut the Anthropology Department’s funding - paid Boas’s secretary’s salary and sponsored field research trips for his female graduate students. Boas encouraged his students to do independent research early on and to learn from one another and look out for one another, which they did with some intensity, though not without spats. The group around him, often including Parsons, met regularly for Thursday city lunches and Tuesday evening seminars at Boas’s New Jersey home.

Each one in this circle was in some way an outsider, like Boas himself. Ruth Benedict was an awkwardly shy, stuttering, partially deaf literary college graduate caught in a loveless marriage. In her thirties she signed up for a graduate course (“Sex in Ethnology”) with Parsons. In 1934 she published one of the greatest anthropological statements of all time, *Patterns of Culture*, the source of the term “cultural relativity”. No society, she argued, had a monopoly on the true and the right. What might repulse an American - she gave as examples homosexuality and women falling in trance - are in another society given positive meaning as routes to special gifts and

supernatural power, while what may seem ordinary to us - “arrogant and unbridled egoists as family men ... and in business” - may cause incomparable suffering though it is “supported by every tenet of our civilization”. Boas wrote in his introduction that “the relativity of what is considered social or asocial, normal or abnormal is seen in a new light”. Clearly, here was a point of view congenial to those who felt out of kilter with their own social world.

Margaret Mead was another such figure. Though a child of privilege, she was small and frail and felt out of place at her first, Midwestern, college, so she transferred in 1920 to Barnard, where she found herself in a new group of “freethinking, adventurous women”, some of them lesbian, “half of them Jewish, and all equally acquainted with Bolshevism and the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay”. This was New York in the Jazz Age, culturally vibrant and sexually liberating. Mead and her girlfriends marched in support of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Italian immigrant anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. They took the subway downtown to dances in Greenwich Village. In the autumn of Mead’s senior year she took an anthropology class with Boas and Benedict in which she did so well that she was excused from taking the final exam. In the spring Mead became Benedict’s lover - the beginning of a lifelong relationship. Mead was already engaged to a young Episcopalian minister, but even so, after her graduation, Benedict sent her a gift of \$300 as a “No Red Tape Fellowship” she could use to start graduate school. “Professor Boas and I have nothing to offer”, Benedict wrote, “but an opportunity to do work that matters.” Mead would go on to do field research in American Samoa, New Guinea and Bali and write anthropological bestsellers that used cross-cultural insight to challenge orthodoxies regarding adolescence, childhood, sex and gender, such as the popular assumption that a society’s expected gendered behaviours are givens of biological sex. She was consulted by presidents, frequently appeared on television, and wrote a regular column in the women’s magazine *Redbook*. She became one of the most famous women scientists of her time and the public face of anthropology for most Americans.

A Dakota woman from Standing Rock, Ella Cara Deloria was studying at Columbia's Teachers College when Boas heard about her. He hired her to check the monographs white anthropologists had written about her own people and do new research to correct them - probably the first time this had ever been done formally by a Native American. Deloria never enrolled in the graduate programme but Boas tutored her anyway. On a slip of paper she took notes on his teachings: "Get nowhere unless prejudices first forgotten ... Cultures are many, man is one. Boas". Eventually, the two collaborated on a scholarly grammar of the Dakota language, their names appearing on its title page as co-authors.

Another fascinating and pathbreaking Boasian was Zora Neale Hurston, an African American from Florida. Though best known as a literary figure, Hurston braided her writing career with anthropology, which became her art's anchor. She came of age in a time of anti-black pogroms, lynchings and the Jim Crow laws. But she dissented from the expectation that, as a black writer, she was obliged to write about what she called "the Race Problem", declaring herself "thoroughly sick of the subject". While majoring in English, she took an anthropology class, where an outstanding paper she wrote brought her to Boas's attention. Boas arranged a fellowship for her to go to her home town in Florida, the country's first incorporated black city, to collect folklore. She spent three years at it, between comings and goings, and the product was the masterpiece *Mules and Men*, which Benedict helped her to edit.

In pungent, humorous prose Hurston dramatizes the stories, folk sayings, wisecracks and insults exchanged by people in Southern black towns and work camps, showing that their oral culture, as King writes, was "a work of communal genius that could be understood as well as appreciated", and that it was not "in need of correction" nor a "holdover from Africa", "but something vibrantly, chaotically, brilliantly alive". (The book opens with a veiled homage to Boas in an irreverent folk tale about the Creation telling that people acquired souls when an intrepid Jew snatched God's fearsome, lightning-shooting "soul-piece", and it "burnt

him and tore him and throwed him down and lifted him up”). In the year the book was published, Hurston enrolled as an anthropology doctoral student at Columbia, with Boas her mentor, and, equipped with a Guggenheim Fellowship, she set out for new research in Jamaica and Haiti. This led to her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a tragic love story that she built around her anthropological experience of those places and her documentation of black ways of speech (“you got tuh go there tuh know there”, says the novel’s protagonist, succinctly stating the method). In fact, Hurston conducted longer and more intensely immersive field research than any other Boasian (even getting herself initiated as a “voodoo” healer in New Orleans), and though she gave up on her doctorate and disavowed an academic career, she continued to head back South to collect folklore for years, a labour of love she funded as long as she could with the proceeds from her popular books.

The Boas circle was no utopia. There were setbacks and jealousies, and everyone was not equal. Though Boas sought to promote the women, they faced discrimination in employment, particularly Benedict, who for years was only an adjunct lecturer and Boas’s assistant. Even as the department began to grow again in the 1920s, it took a change of deans before Boas could convince Columbia to appoint her to assistant professor. By current standards, he was patriarchal (the students affectionately called him “Papa Franz”). While he himself was a paragon of propriety and did not have love affairs, the students did, with each other, and one wonders at the bitter revelations that might have surfaced in an age of #MeToo. The anthropologists’ relationships with the native and indigenous people they studied were often opportunistic. By current standards, their ideas of tolerance and valuing others – for, rather than despite, their peculiarities vis-a-vis ourselves – may seem merely tepid and quaint.

But in its own day the anthropology of this group was contrarian, fresh and

transgressive, a vehicle for reimagining race, nationalism, gender, sexuality, culture, deviance and norms themselves. King presents the Boas circle as an appealing archetype for our time: a network of marginals, argumentative and diverse, a deeply nonconformist German-Jewish immigrant surrounded by an African American, women who loved women, and still more Jews and immigrants. The image belies the frequent misconception of an academic discipline with a lily-white founding history.

And so the Boas circle stood as both an affront and a challenge to the white supremacist, heteronormative nationalist order that Grant and many in power were championing. In the 1920s, “America for Americans” became not only a rallying cry for restricting immigration from Europe but also a slogan for the Ku Klux Klan, used in its violent campaigns to intimidate blacks and enforce Jim Crow segregation by race in schools, parks, trains, buses, public offices and even cemeteries. Laws were passed banning intermarriage and legalizing the sterilization of criminals and physically or mentally disabled “defectives” so as to avert an imagined, genetic weakening of the white “racial stock”. This upsetting possibility was elaborated by a new pseudo-science, “eugenics”, that was obsessively publicized. Over and over again, Boas spoke out against this “mobilization of sham science to justify bigotry”. But he wasn’t winning those battles. International congresses on eugenics were hosted by the American Museum of Natural History, where Boas had once been a curator, and three-quarters of US universities introduced courses in the subject. Boasian anthropologists who opposed eugenics were shut out from many universities, such as the University of Virginia, where I teach, that were then building robust eugenics programmes.

It took the Second World War to turn the tide. By the war’s end, the Nazis’ “race madness” had produced such undeniable horrors that Americans were keen to see such racism as a trait of the enemy. But King reminds us that, as Hitler told the *New York Times* in 1932, “It was America that taught us”. Not only did Grant inspire his brutal programme of “racial hygiene”, when Hitler ascended to power, he directed

Nazi lawyers to study the race law of the US as a model for isolating, disenfranchising and stripping rights from a major section of the German population. They adapted the model by substituting Jews for African Americans and increasing the stipulated blood quantum to a quarter (one grandparent) from as little as “one drop” (any ancestor at all), the then standard in many US states.

Near the end of his life Boas used every means at his disposal to fight against Nazism. He denounced Nazi racial science and supported the anti-Nazi underground. In an open letter he beseeched Germany’s President Hindenburg to block Hitler from forming a one-party dictatorship. He rallied his networks to help European intellectuals fleeing persecution. In response, his German university degrees were revoked and his books were pulled from German libraries and burnt, along with those of Marx, Einstein and Freud.

King’s book tells this many-layered, mostly forgotten story cogently and compellingly, and his collective method is a wise and welcome departure from the standard genre of a book focused on one towering individual. While its main contribution is to breathe new life into Boas’s story, which has tended to become ossified in conventional classroom presentations, it also enriches our understanding of his female students, especially Hurston, enabling us to appreciate that she worked to develop innovative, story-driven ways of communicating anthropological insights.

The Reinvention of Humanity is not without shortcomings. It jumps over Boas’s middle years when he was a sternly critical teacher, mostly of men. And it makes too little of Parsons’s role in rousing him from a long period of despondency, when he feared death from a cancerous growth on his face that coincided with the height of political attacks on his job and department. Without her social and financial support he might never have made it to the later stage of his career when he had a warmer mentoring style.

The book also downplays the power dynamics of the Boas circle internally. For example, when Mead was in the midst of field research in New Guinea with her second husband, the New Zealand anthropologist Reo Fortune, she met and fell in love with the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson who was doing fieldwork nearby. As part of her move to leave Fortune for Bateson she concocted a deeply problematic theory of inborn temperamental types very much like the race theories Boas criticized. Mead used this theory to justify her rejection of Fortune as due to his possessive, competitive and aggressive nature, while she and Bateson were both innately responsive, giving and “cherishing”. Mead applied the same temperamental categories to the New Guinea cultures she had studied, resulting in a gross mischaracterization of Mountain Arapesh culture in her famous book, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Cultures*. To block Fortune from criticizing it, and also to keep him out of the picture while she and Bateson took up in New York (they eventually married), Mead connived with Benedict to send Fortune back to New Guinea for lengthy field research among warring Highlands tribes. Mead secretly provided the funding, which Benedict told Fortune came from an “anonymous millionaire”. They hid all this from Boas, who had been trying to cobble together work for Fortune in New York on the understanding that he was Mead’s spouse. King mostly accepts Mead’s own, interested description of Fortune in her memoir, dismissing her self-serving theory of temperamental types as a mere burst of “madness”. But there is a darker reality this episode obscures: even underdogs fighting against noxious powers can themselves wield power in disturbing ways.

The Boasian circle came apart after Boas’s death in 1942. By then his most important ideas, such as the concept of cultures as plural, had so fully entered into common understanding that they were no longer fresh, and his own students, especially Mead, had grown impatient with their mentor’s cautious reluctance to generalize, as well as his relativizing insistence that knowledge cannot exist apart from embodied knowers. From across the Atlantic came the siren call of “social anthropology”, as a global, objective “comparative sociology” that formulated social laws and “systems

of kinship and social organization”. Boas came to be seen not as having been wrong, but perhaps worse - as passé. He was mostly forgotten, his writings no longer taught.

Then, in the 1960s a shock wave of internal critiques imploded those scientific pretensions, which were suddenly seen as having aligned anthropology with the view-from-above of colonial forms of knowledge and authority that were unsustainable in an era of decolonization. Half a century later, anthropology is still working through these critiques of its flaws like internal racism and fraught relations with indigenous peoples, which are being discussed in classes and conferences with a bitter anguish that few outsiders can fathom. Anthropology grapples with its demons in a way most disciplines do not, but often at the cost of holding up its past as fit for nothing but scorn. Certainly, no anthropologist today would have written a book with half the generosity shown towards the history of the field as the international affairs professor Charles King has. In breathing new life into Boas’s story he has given a gift to the field of anthropology and to us all.

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