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The Aims of Boasian Ethnography: Creating the Materials for Traditional Humanistic Scholarship

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

THE AIMS OF BOASIAN ETHNOGRAPHY: CREATING THE MATERIALS
FOR TRADITIONAL HUMANISTIC SCHOLARSHIP

Despite numerous discussions of his fieldwork (cf. citations in Stocking 1974:83), the aims of Franz Boas' ethnography have yet to be placed in adequate historical context. Modern anthropologists enculturated in the ideals of "participant observation" understandably have difficulty appreciating an ethnographic strategy which saw native ceremonials as interruptions of serious research--a theme which recurs frequently in Boas' early field diaries (Rohner 1969). Because Boas had little to say about fieldwork method in print, and his explicit methodological training focussed on linguistics, physical anthropology, and the critical discussion of contemporary anthropological theory, the rationale underlying his fieldwork enterprise has had to be inferred. The most systematic such discussion has emphasized his "natural history" (as opposed to social philosophy) orientation (Smith 1959). What has not been properly appreciated, however, is its connection to 19th century traditions of humanistic scholarship in the historical and philological study of antique civilizations generally. Evident in a letter that Boas wrote to William Holmes on the documentary function of the text (cf. Stocking 1974:122), this connection is suggested also in the recent doctoral dissertation of Curtis Hinsley on the history of Washington anthropology (Hinsley 1976).

The climactic episode in Hinsley's dissertation is his analysis of testimony taken in 1903 by a committee of the Smithsonian Institution, which, in the aftermath of the death of Major J. W. Powell, was appointed to investigate the conduct of the Bureau of American Ethnology. In the course of the investigation, questions were raised about the actual "ownership" and appropriate physical location of data collected by fieldworkers whose research had been jointly sponsored by the Bureau and the American Museum--and whose materials were, at various stages of their analysis, often in Boas' hands in New York. In the course of responding to these issues, Boas offered, almost incidentally, a succinct statement of what in his view the anthropologist went out into the field to collect:

[I have instructed my students] to collect certain things and to collect with everything they get information in the native language and to obtain grammatical information that is necessary to explain their texts. Consequently the results of their journeys are the following: they get specimens; they get explanations of the specimens; they get connected texts that partly refer to the specimens and partly simply to abstract things concerning the people; and they get grammatical information. The line of division is clear; the grammatical material and the texts to to the Bureau, and the specimens go to the New York Museum. (quoted in Hinsley 1976:495 and in Hinsley & Holm 1976:314)

Although this tells more about the formal than the substantive characteristics of Boas' desired ethnographic data, the formal aspect is in a sense the critical one--not, however, simply because of the "object" orientation of 19th century anthropology, but because Boasian fieldwork was intended to produce a body of material that had an objective character in the particular sense that it consisted of material and non-material artifacts created by a people themselves. The apparent transformation between three categories sought and four categories returned may be explained in terms of Boas' views on the nature of specimens, as argued in his early debate with Mason (cf. Stocking 1974:61-67). Since outwardly similar objects could have a different meaning, and since the meaning of an object could be understood only in its relation to the overall cultural life of the people, the "explanations" of specimens would in fact cover many "abstract things concerning the people"--in principle, their culture as a whole, as it was expressed in their own consciousness.

The result of anthropological fieldwork carried out in this mode would be a body of material similar to that through which traditional European humanistic scholars studied earlier phases in the cultural history of literate peoples: physical remains of their art and industry; literary materials in which their history and cultural life were described in their own words; and grammatical material derived from the latter--all of them more or less direct expressions of the "genius" of the people, as free as possible from the "alternating sounds" imposed by the cultural categories of an outside observer.

Since in the case of the peoples anthropologists studied all of this material was essentially contemporaneous in time, its use for historical reconstruction was somewhat problematic--and became, in fact, the central issue of early Boasian anthropological theory. But the passage of time has, as Boas surely anticipated, given it something of the historicity which Boas intended. From later theoretical and methodological perspectives one may surely feel the limitations of such an ethnographic enterprise. But in its best manifestations (as in Boas' own "five foot shelf" on the Kwakiutl), it did in fact approach the Boasian goal of constituting the Kwakiutl equivalent of the remains of Sanskrit India--which, as Boas himself suggested, might subsequently be analysed from varying theoretical points of view. With the increasing strength of hermeneutical orientations in anthropology, and the realization that all fieldwork--even that carried on in the participant/observer mode--consists in the interactive constitution of cultural texts, the Boasian corpus may eventually be accorded a greater value than for many years it seemed to deserve. (G.S.)

Hinsley, C., "The Development of a Profession: Anthropology in Washington, D.C., 1946-1903" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Department of History, 1976).

Hinsley, C. & W. Holm, "A Cannibal in the National Museum: The Early Career of Franz Boas in America," American Anthropologist 78 (1976): 306-316.

Stocking, G. W., The Shaping of American Anthropology: A Franz Boas Reader, 1883-1911 (New York, 1974).