



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 6
Issue 1 1979

Article 5

1-1-1979

Anti-Imperialism and Anthropology: The Case of Frederick Starr

George W. Stocking

Erving Winslow

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <http://repository.upenn.edu/han/vol6/iss1/5>
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Liberty, Margot, ed., 1978. American Indian Intellectuals. St. Paul, Minnesota.

Judd, Neil, 1967. The Bureau of American Ethnology: A Partial History. Norman, Oklahoma.

Stocking, George W., 1974. The Boas plan for the study of American Indian languages. In Studies in the History of Linguistics, ed. D. Hymes. Bloomington, Indiana.

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

ANTI-IMPERIALISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY: THE CASE OF FREDERICK STARR

In the last decade or so, the relationship of anthropology and imperialism has been the topic of both ideological controversy (and more recently) historical research. Despite their frequent grounding in Marxist assumption, controversialists have seemed to imply that the undeniable linkage was as much a matter of moral inadequacy as of social determinism: had anthropologists of earlier periods possessed a proper moral sensibility, they would have opposed European imperialism rather than contributing to its ideological base or seeking its support for their anthropological research. The problematic character of retrospective moral judgment on such issues is illustrated in the case of one turn-of-the-century American anthropologist who seems to have been actively involved in the organized anti-imperialist movement: Frederick Starr, who was on the faculty at the University of Chicago between 1892 and 1923.

While the details of Starr's activity on this issue must await the investigation of some future biographer, his papers contain an interesting letter from Erving Winslow, secretary of the Anti-Imperialist League, indicating that Starr on occasion used his anthropology as a weapon in the service of the anti-imperialist cause.

The Anti-Imperialist League
20 Central St., Boston, Feb. 6, 1908

Dear Prof. Starr:

For the evening meeting of the Twentieth Century Club March 26th I will suggest the use of the subject "Field Experiences of an Anthropologist" with a sly introduction of anti-imperialism. I will let you know whether the lantern slides are desired or not later. For the luncheon on the 27th the subject can be "The Natives of the Philippines," with anti-imperialism turned on in full (no slides). I

am expecting something too for the evening of Saturday March 28, if it is not working you too hard, but the matter is not settled yet.

I am your obedient servant,

[signed] Erving Winslow
Secretary. .

Whatever the extent of his commitment, Starr's ideology would seem, from a present perspective, not entirely consistent. Although he was anti-imperialist in relation to U.S. overseas involvement, he was an outspoken defender of Belgian rule in the Congo against the attacks of reformist critics--citing his own experience during fieldwork in 1905-06 to support the relative beneficence of Belgian administration. And like many anti-imperialists of his day, Starr was by no means egalitarian in his racial attitudes. On the contrary, his notions about non-European peoples were strongly tinged with conventional evolutionary assumption.

The contrast with Franz Boas (who was at several points considered as a possible replacement or supplement to Starr on the Chicago faculty) might perhaps be worth pursuing. Although Boas later dated his disillusion with the promise of America to the imperialist aftermath of the Spanish War, and he was perhaps the single most effective critic of the racialist assumptions justifying European dominance, his response to American imperialism in 1900 was an attempt to organize businessmen with Far Eastern interests to support anthropological research in that area. Although this particular entrepreneurial effort was rather short-lived, Boas' pragmatic professionalism may have been a factor in the contrasting fates of anthropology at Columbia and at Chicago in this period. Starr loved to see his name in the newspapers (as his numerous scrapbooks testify)--usually on issues with much less present moral resonance; but his highly idiosyncratic personal style was not oriented toward the institutionalization of an academic discipline. During the thirty years in which he was Chicago's anthropologist, the discipline was reduced to the status of an undergraduate adjunct to the work of the world's premier department of sociology.

Without accepting the graduate research department as the necessary historical outcome of Rousseau's call for a comparative study of human nature, one may suggest that Boas' academic critique of racist assumption was perhaps a more significant contribution to the welfare and self-determination of non-European peoples than Starr's "sly introduction of anti-imperialism," before a meeting of New England upper-class reformers. Whether there were other more effective or morally satisfying anti-imperialist stances actually open to those who sought to define themselves as "anthropologists" in this period is perhaps a moot issue. (G.W.S.)

(Letter from the Frederick Starr papers reproduced by permission of the Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library.)