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Franz Boas and the American Physical Character

Peter Gregg Slater

Stocking, George W., Jr., ed. The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader (New York: Basic Books, 1974). (see also Darnell and Hymes above).

Development of Ethnology in France

The doctoral dissertation of the late Donald Bender, "Early French Ethnography in Africa and the Development of Ethnology in France" is available in bound mimeographed form from the Department of Anthropology, Ford Hall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455. The cost, postpaid, is \$1.00 in North America, \$2.00 for overseas subscribers. Checks should be made out to the University of Minnesota.

Bibliography of the History of Anthropology

Don Fowler, Director of the Desert Research Institute, Building 3700, University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89507, is willing to send copies of a seventy-five page bibliography he uses in teaching the history of anthropology to those interested.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

FRANZ BOAS AND THE AMERICAN PHYSICAL CHARACTER

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Alarmed at the onslaught on Nazism, concerned with the rescue of European scholars, and anxious to complete as much as possible of his life-long work on the Northwest Coast Indians, Franz Boas in 1940 had a heavy heart and full hands. Nevertheless, Boas found the time and energy to write an article rebutting recent criticisms of an investigation of immigrant families he had conducted three decades earlier. The next year, his penultimate one, he was again publicly defending the "head form" study he had done in 1908-1911 for the U.S. Immigration Commission. Why, in these crisis years, did the octogenarian anthropologist believe that the "head form" study was of such significance as to require the refutation of arguments against its validity? Why, so long after the publication of the results, was it still controversial?

And what had led Boas, a man known in 1908 primarily for work in the Arctic and in the Pacific Northwest, to take up the physical anthropology of New York immigrant families in the first place? These are some of the questions I want to answer in a book tentatively entitled "Franz Boas and the American Physical Character."

As the title indicates, the "head form" study must be placed in a wide context. It can be viewed as an important thread in Boas' professional life; as an episode in public discussion both of the immigrant influx and of a putative national physical type; and as a phase in the continuing debate among anthropologists about the age-old problem vis-a-vis heredity.

Substantively, the immigrant investigation represented an extension of his earlier work in anthropometry among Indians and among school children. As the investigation proceeded, however, Boas was surprised by indications of important somatic differences, especially in head shape, between immigrant parents and native-born children. The end results confirmed these initial findings and called into question prevailing orthodoxy in physical anthropology. Hopes for a massive and definitive followup of the 1908-1911 investigation were never realized, but Boas did undertake further smaller projects in this area, and to the end of his life remained interested in the questions that the study raised.

The general public learned of Boas' discovery through extensive newspaper and magazine coverage. Public interest in Boas' findings was spurred by the long-running debate about what effects the American environment had upon the mental and physical qualities of various ethnic groups. Also involved was the shadowy but persistent notion that Caucasian Americans were gradually developing into a unique physical type, a distinctive "race." Both subjects were of venerable lineage, going back at least to the Jefferson-Buffon controversy, and drew on elemental feelings about the continent itself, about the original Indian inhabitants, and about the status of the transplanted white and black races.

Professional anthropologists discussed the immigrant investigation on narrower and more technical grounds. Upset by Boas' sudden challenge to the prevailing belief that the head form was solely a matter of heredity, they tended in the years immediately following the investigation to be highly critical, sometimes without a true understanding of its methods and results. Gradually, however, professional opinion became more favorable, although even in the 1930s anthropological journals carried a number of attacks.

The "head form" study has been frequently commented upon in secondary sources, both in anthropology and in history, but,

except for the chapter in Stocking's Race, Culture, and Evolution, there has been little in the way of extended discussion. Using both manuscripts and published materials, I hope to show the actual origins, course, and results of Boas' investigation, and make clear its far-reaching significance.

Research Notes

The present listings exhaust our stock of usable research reports. We are aware, however, of other projects for which we have received no information, and we continue to encourage readers to send us brief reports on research in progress on the form we have again attached to this issue. From the term "usable" it will be evident that we have received some reports we did not feel sufficiently well defined or sufficiently historical to include. Unfortunately, it has not been possible in every case to carry on correspondence on such matters, but if authors disagree with our editorial judgment, we encourage them to submit further information. We also would welcome longer statements, of up to three hundred words, describing research in progress, although we can print only one of these in each issue.

Robert Ackerman, Department of English, Columbia University, informs us that his work on Sir James G. Frazer (cf. HAN I:2) is now to take the form of an intellectual biography.

Derek Freeman, Professor of Anthropology, Australian National University, author of a recent paper in Current Anthropology on the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer, is now working on the theoretical and ideological basis of the Boasian paradigm in American anthropology, with particular reference to the Samoan researches of Margaret Mead.

Ian C. Jarvie, author of The Revolution in Anthropology and The Story of Social Anthropology, is currently doing research on the metaphysical underpinnings of anthropology, including the doctrines of the unity of mankind, racialism and relativism, with special reference to the pre-Adamite issue up to and including the American pre-Adamite Alexander Winchell.

Wolf Lepenies, Professor of Sociology at the Freie Universität Berlin (West Germany) is preparing a volume on specific problems in the history and sociology of the human sciences, especially ethnology and physical anthropology. He is especially interested in the question whether the theories and procedures