



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 19
Issue 2 *December 1992*

Article 3

1-1-1992

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Franz Boas

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'One does not get as much from the girls':

Franz Boas and Women Students

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As the adjective Boasian suggests, Franz Boas is almost as well known for his students as for his own work. Among these were a large number of women, including Ruth Benedict, Gladys Reichard, Ruth Underhill, Margaret Mead, Ruth Bunzel, Gene Weltfish, Erna Gunther, Viola Garfield, and Frederica de Laguna. But encouraging to women as he was to become in the 1920s and 1930s, it was not always so.

In the fall of 1900 Boas returned from a field trip to British Columbia to discover that fifteen women had enrolled in his introductory undergraduate course--a consequence of students from Barnard College, the women's affiliate of Columbia University, having been that year admitted as regular students to Columbia's courses. Writing to his mother, Sophie, Boas described the sudden appearance of so many women in his class as "terrible" (BFP: FB/SB 10/15/00). His next letter expanded on the subject:

My introductory course this year is overrun with women students. I wish I could get rid of some of them and exchange them for men, not because I have anything against women, but because men students simply will not come into the course. I have 16 in total, so I have 12 women and 4 men. In my advanced courses, there are no women at all (BFP: FB/SB 10/12/00)

His mother, who since her youth had strong feminist sentiments (Herzig 1980:107-08), responded with the hope that he was not making a mistake, to which Boas replied:

You did not take my remark about too many women [Frauenzimmerischen] in class quite right. I have nothing against it that women also learn where they wish, but male students do not come where there are a lot of females. On the whole, one does not get as much from the girls (Mädchen) as from the young men (Männer), who have greater independence of thought than the girls. Therefore I would only naturally not want to have the men chased away, and I think that next year I will arrange that the course be given separately for the women. In the 5 years which I have been here, I have, in total about 16 serious students, among whom there were no girls. Of the 16, about 4 or 5 actually studied anthropology as a major subject and of these three went to their doctorate. You see, then, that it is no prejudice if I prefer not to have women take part in the general course. (BFP:FB/SB 11/14/00)

Later that year, Boas wrote to the acting dean of Barnard College: "Owing to the peculiar character of anthropological subject mater, I consider it much preferable to give this course to Columbia students and Barnard students separately"--although the same objection did not apparently hold true in his senior year course in American ethnology (AMNH: FB/J.H. Robinson 2/2/01]. Boas' recommendation was not acted upon until 1903, by which time Boas had stopped giving the introductory course himself; that year Anthropology 1 was given separately by Livingston Farrand to 27 Columbia men and 36 Barnard women.

These fragmentary pieces suggest a certain complexity to Boas' attitude toward women students. It seems likely that Columbia's men students might have tended to avoid courses in which Barnard women formed a majority. This certainly was a common perception of their conduct at the time and one of the reasons for moves (such as Chicago's two years later) to establish more segregated classes at coeducational institutions. It is also the case that in the moral climate of the day, some subjects did not lend themselves comfortably to teaching before a mixed class. Boas' position might thus be glossed as reflecting a realistic attitude. On the other hand, it is not easy to reconcile Boas' professed lack of prejudice with his generalization about women students' lesser independence of mind or his statement that there had been not a single "girl" student among sixteen serious students in five years. There would seem to be a tension, too, with his earlier pronouncement that despite a smaller brain, "the faculty of women is undoubtedly just as high as that of men" (1894:233). There is also the issue of language: while "Frauenzimmerischen" [literally, "women-roomish"] did not perhaps carry quite the same connotative burden as today, it had long been tinged with contempt--though Boas much later used it, about Margaret Mead, in a context of endearing praise: "Die Kleine ist ein tüchtiges Frauenzimmer" ["The little one is a capable Frauenzimmer"] (BFP: FB/Antonia Wohlaer 5/30/27).

There is, of course, also the larger professional context of Boas' anthropology in this period: his desire to create a cadre of young, academically-trained anthropologists who would carry out his field projects and staff museum, university, and government positions. Although there had in fact been several women anthropologists associated with the Bureau of American Ethnology, as well as wealthy women who supported anthropological research, it was no doubt realistic in the pre-World War I period to expect that such a professional cadre would be overwhelmingly male. To prevent Barnard students from obstructing that goal, Boas sought separate classes at the introductory level. This freed him from the presumed constraints of mixed classes without denying women an introduction to anthropology. And although Columbia policy would have permitted it, he did not exclude women from his advanced and graduate courses--except in the case of his physical anthropology course at the medical school, from which they were barred by administrative regulation.

Women students remained a problem, however, elsewhere in the anthropology division at Columbia. Farrand did "not like to have women take part" in Anthropology 7, his course on primitive culture, because the subject matter was "not adapted to treatment in a mixed class." And in fact they were not allowed in, although Farrand would have given this course (as he did Anthropology 1) as a separate course, if Barnard had been willing to pay the cost (BPP:FB/E.D. Perry 5/10/04; American Anthropologist 1905).

When and why Boas began to take women students more seriously is a topic for further investigation. It was, however, certainly not when the first women came into his graduate classes. Two who enrolled in 1904 did not perform well: "They are, I fear, stupid," he commented, and wondered why they had bothered (BFP: FB/SB 12/9/04, 1/6/05). His attitude may have been affected, beginning the following year, by the experiences of his own daughters at Barnard and Columbia. Or it may have been the influence of Elsie Clews Parsons, whom he got to know well a few years later. It may also have been his own closer association with Barnard, forced on him by his war-time difficulties with President Nicholas Murray Butler. Most likely, however, it was his own discovery of women students of independent thought who gave at least as much as the men. "I have had a rather curious experience in graduate work during the last few years," he wrote with apparent surprise in 1920. "All my best students are women" (BPP:FB/B. Laufer 7/23/20).

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The research for this note was done for a biography of Boas, the first volume of which, to about 1906, is more-or-less complete.