

Before Boas: The Genesis of Ethnography and Ethnology in the German Enlightenment.
Han F. Vermeulen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. 746pp.

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To use “magisterial” and “compendious” about this book may understate the case. Vermeulen’s monograph on the “genesis” of ethnography and ethnology will sit as a large and imposing bookend on any history of anthropology shelf for many years to come. It is hard to give any kind of effective summary of a work involving such a vast cast of intellectuals and such wide historical and geographical range. The outline points, though, are as follows. Modern cultural anthropology (Vermeulen calls it sociocultural anthropology; I don’t have space here to show why I think this is mistaken), inherits its core themes from two approaches developed in the enlightenment: ethnography and ethnology. Gottfried Leibniz (particularly his relationship with Russian emperor Peter the Great) turns out to be a cornerstone, not only in the story of how ethnography became its own type of study, but also how and where it was studied. It was Leibniz who began the program of research in Russia and who emphasized the study of language as definitive in understanding *ethnos*. Language was crucial for Leibniz as a revealer of reality, hence the varieties of language were crucial revealers of the variants of reality. This is a theme that has never gone away in cultural anthropology.

Contrary, then, to established twentieth-century anthropological assumptions, Vermeulen shows that the expansive moment of ethnography and ethnology was the 1740s, and the scholars involved were Germans who worked in and on peoples in the Russian empire. This was the period in which the keywords *ethnographia* (or *völker-beschreibung*) as the description of peoples and *ethnologie* as the comparison of peoples or nations acquired its technical status as a kind of scientific inquiry in its own right, and began to be complexified into distinct subtypes with varied methodological directions. Intellectual elaboration in the same years lay behind the idea of *völkerkunde*, a word that has more recent associations with racism and racialism, but at the time had no such association because the concept of natural race had not then been elaborated. Vermeulen gives us unparalleled detail on how the ethnographic work of figures such as Gerhard Müller and Daniel Messerschmidt and their linguistic pursuits in Siberia built on Leibniz’ polymathy.

This is a book about ethnology and ethnography, but it also touches on the different trajectory of anthropology as a kind of inquiry, since there is a need to explain how Boas came to bring the German ethnological project to America and call it anthropology. This story is rather complicated and takes us in many directions. Certainly, Immanuel Kant is an important figure, since he, at the very least, crucially refined the intellectual use of the word anthropology. Here I think Vermeulen misses something important. He argues that where ethnology focused on language and saw difference at this level in the lives of peoples or nations, anthropology centered on the natural history of mankind. He suggests that out of this view of anthropology emerged the idea of natural races that later gave rise to the racialized anthropology of the nineteenth century.

But, Kant’s role in this is much more complicated than the one assigned to him in this book. It is true that Kant had only moderate interest in ethnology, and did take a key part in defining the

modern use of the word “race.” However, Vermeulen’s view that Kant’s anthropology is about humans as natural beings is true only in a very provisory way. In fact, Kant, in his anthropology concerns himself precisely with the capacity of human beings freely to affect the world *beyond* what we might take to be their narrow natural endowment. Hence Kant prefaces his anthropology by saying that anthropology studies what the human being “makes of” itself as a “free-acting” being, beyond its status as a physical being. Though Kant has a small role in this book, the effect of Vermeulen’s view on the overall narrative is arguably great. Anthropology tends to become physical anthropology, a study further racialized during the nineteenth century. Thus Franz Boas appears as the force who saves anthropology from itself, bringing Leibnizian themes of language and ethnos back to the fore. Boas’ well-acknowledged Kantianism is noted, as is the central Kantian theme of the “psychic unity of mankind” (p. 431), but the actual anthropology that goes with this is ignored. We could equally narrate all this by arguing that Kantianism offered a universalist epistemological frame for ethnological inquiries without which they have tended to ripple out toward untenable relativism, a stance held by Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, and many others. This valuable book comes at a moment when anthropologists are again debating whether anthropology is, or should be, the same as ethnography, while ontologically oriented anthropologists are reclaiming Leibniz and rejecting Kant. Everything changes, everything remains the same.