The Limitations of Boas’ Anthropology∗

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MURRAY WAX

University of Chicago

THIS paper will examine the dominant convictions of Franz Boas on a variety of subjects. We will show that, whatever their individual merits, they formed, when linked together, a chain that constricted creative research in cultural anthropology. By their combined standards, scarcely any research was judged satisfactory. The great talents of Boas himself were so restricted that he could not produce any positive, integrated work of significance, and his function became that of critic.

I. THE AIMS OF INQUIRY

The form of a typical ethnological study by Franz Boas was as follows: A general hypothesis about culture or about cultural processes had been advanced by some scholar. Boas would then collect a considerable mass of data of the most objective kind – material objects or texts. He would describe these succinctly and with little or no interpretation. The data, so presented, would speak for themselves: they were an exception to the general hypothesis and it was therefore refuted. Then Boas would present his own point of view: the situation was a complex one; the refuted hypothesis had ignored the complexities; a full analysis, if humanly possible, would reveal many factors in operation.

The logic of his argument was simple and potent. The hypothesis advanced could be framed in the form, “All A is B.” Boas would present an entity that was clearly an A and yet equally clearly not a B. Accordingly, the hypothesis was false.

This logic was and is frequently utilized by natural scientists. But the aim there is usually not to discredit completely but to test the limits, to discover the region where the hypothesis applies and that where it fails. Then the scientist attempts to reformulate the hypothesis so that in its revised form it fits both regions. But Boas was not interested in the partial truth that might be implicit in the refuted generalization; as a generalization it was wholly false and should no longer receive any respect whatsoever from the scientist. He would, therefore, attack it over and over again in his publications and in his classes. Lowie has reported on Boas as a pedagogue (1947:313-14):

Other men’s views he often treated in a way likely to mislead the immature, for by concentrating on controversial issues he sometimes conveyed the impression of total condemnation where there was partial dissent... His critique of environmentalism, for instance, was urged so forcibly that for years I failed to grasp how carefully he took cognizance of geographical factors.

Boas had been trained in Germany when the radical empiricist movement in the natural sciences was flourishing and was invading psychology via psychophysics. Men such as Rudolph Virchow, Gustav Fechner, and Ernst Mach, as well no doubt as Hermann Helmholtz, influenced Boas greatly by their research, writing, or teaching. Of Virchow, he wrote in 1902:

There are but few students who possess that cold enthusiasm for truth that enables them to be always clearly conscious of the sharp line between an attractive theory and the observation that has been secured by hard and earnest work [Lowie 1937: 155].

It is likely that the young Boas already saw himself as the introducer of strict empirical methods into ethnology.

At Columbia Boas preached empiricism to his students almost as a crusade. Science was a holy vocation, and the young men who entered it would be subjected to many temptations: Speculation, Theory, (traditional) Philosophy. The intelligence of the scientist would desire to generalize on the basis of inadequate data or would be attracted by the seductive phrases of an armchair theorist. He must train himself to resist such impulses and not to stray from the path of strictest empiricism. Boas’ preaching, reinforced by his tremendous abilities and his sincere dedication to science, converted his students and decisively influenced the character of American anthropology. Even when his students, as

∗ I am grateful for the encouragement and stimulating criticism of Robert Redfield.
mature scholars, could perceive that Boas’ empiricism was so extreme as to be hurtful to the progress of the discipline, they still defended their teacher in emotionally and morally toned words. In the section from which the passage below is excerpted, Lowie noted quite clearly how Boas’ reluctance to generalize had handicapped further research, and characterized his motives as “puritanical.” But even Lowie, “that eminently sane man,” could not permit this criticism to stand unmodified; he immediately turned to the defense and labeled the appreciation of generalization as a craving.

His critics suggest an incapacity for synthesis; his intimates know that he forms opinions on all anthropological questions but refrains from utterance when the evidence seems indecisive. That even the provisional syntheses or this independent and erudite thinker would shed floods or light is unquestionable; it is not, however, Boas’ method or procedure....

The craver of systems cannot understand a scientist’s progress from problem to problem without at once generalizing a particular solution achieved.... [His] attitude is the scientist’s as opposed to the philosopher’s [Lowie 1937: 151-52].

In replying publicly to the foreign scholars whose works he had so often attacked and who had responded with criticism of his antitheoretical position, Boas emphasized in 1920 a more positive attitude toward “ultimate problems” (1940:283-84):

It may seem to the distant observer that American students are engaged in a mass of detailed investigations without much bearing upon the solution or the ultimate problems of a philosophic history of human civilization. I think this interpretation of the American attitude would be unjust because the ultimate questions are as near to our hearts as they are to those of other scholars, only we do not hope to be able to solve an intricate historical problem by a formula.

Feeling, perhaps, that more than this verbal statement was necessary, he listed some of the “general conclusions” deriving from the American studies. Among them we note the following (the alphabetical labeling is my own):

(a) ... a surplus of food supply is liable to bring about an increase of population and an increase of leisure, which gives opportunity for occupations that are not absolutely necessary for the needs of every day life. In turn the increase of population and of leisure, which may be applied to new inventions, gives rise to a greater food supply and to a further increase in the amount of leisure, so that a cumulative effect results [Boas 1940:285].

(b) ... the sequence of industrial inventions in the Old World and in America, which I consider as independent. A period of food gathering and of the use of stone was followed by the invention of agriculture, of pottery and finally of the use of metals. Obviously, this order is based on the increased amount of time given by mankind to the use of natural products, of tools and utensils, and to the variations that developed with it. Although in this case parallelism seems to exist on the two continents, it would be futile to follow out the order in detail [Boas 1940: 287].

(c) A similar consideration may be made in regard to the development of rationalism. It seems to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the development of mankind that activities which have developed unconsciously are gradually made the subject of reasoning. We may observe this process everywhere [Boas 1940:288].

The excerpts demonstrate that Boas could not only refute significant hypotheses, he could advance them. Taken together and integrated, they constitute a good part of the basis for a neo-evolutionary or developmental schema in the style of V. Gordon Childe or of Robert Redfield. But Boas was unwilling to direct his own and his students’ attention toward such a positive goal. As a matter of fact, he had no real warrant for describing (a) and (c) as general conclusions deriving from the American studies; the American students made no systematic studies of these phenomena. Boas preferred attacking the simple-minded, rigid, and ethnocentric evolutionary schemes to framing an accurate, flexible, and humanistic one.

To illustrate the kind of confusion this could precipitate: In 1945 and again in 1947 White accused the Boas school of hampering the development of anthropology as a science by its hostility to theory and, in particular, to evolutionary theory. In calm reply, Lowie (1946) denied the antievolutionary charge. Boas, he declared, had only attacked the unscientific speculations of the early evolutionists, but Boas himself and anthropologists today were really all evolutionists!

How, then, shall we classify and understand the labors of Boas in cultural anthropology? In 1935 Kroeber proposed an ideal typical dichotomy between history and science, which he evidently modeled after the German distinction between Geisteswissenschaft and Naturwissenschaft. In these terms he classified Boas as a scientist. Is this correct?

Both history and science seek the truth, but their typical methods of investigation are different and their typical end-products are different. The methods we shall discuss in a later section; here we confine ourselves to end-products. Science seeks the general statement, the universal proposition true of every situation yet not truly descriptive of any single situation. History seeks to understand the particular events...
of a past with their human ("historical") significances, and to convey this understanding to others. Thus conceived, science is epitomized by a treatise in mathematical physics; history (to use Kroeber’s epitome) by Burchhardt’s The Renaissance. On the one hand, the highest abstraction and greatest universality; on the other hand, the depiction of a particular epoch with its particular, and yet general, human significances and values. (Kroeber emphasized the depictive integration. I believe Weber was equally correct in emphasizing that history was oriented about unique events of human significance and value. But this is of little relevance here.)

Many disciplines have, limitedly, the goals of both history and science. Thus, astronomy seeks to generalize about the behavior of galactic systems and also to describe the history of our solar system. Cultural anthropology seeks to generalize about human culture and society and also to describe particular human groups and their human significances. In such cases, the differently directed activities within the discipline may fruitfully assist each other, and a joint store of particular facts, generalizations about process, and insightful interpretations and understandings come to be accepted as valid. In its happier intervals, cultural anthropology has this appearance.

In terms of his history/science dichotomy Kroeber asserted that Boas was not a historian. Boas agreed that he did not write history, as Kroeber defined the term (but he contended that Kroeber’s usage was “abnormal” and that his approach was historical in any legitimate sense). (Kroeber 1935; Boas 1940: 305-11.)

By default, then, Boas appeared as a scientist. Yet, as he, himself, stated (1940:310):

Redfield’s criticism of my work is summed up in the words: “he does not write histories, and he does not prepare scientific systems.” The latter point agrees fully with my views.

Boas not only did not prepare scientific systems, he did not seek generalizations. As we have observed, he gave verbal allegiance to the pursuit of generalizations, but in fact his interest in them was confined to demonstrating their invalidity. At times, he contended that he was interested in a limited type of generalization about cultural processes, and it was on this basis, apparently, that Kroeber labeled him a scientist. But, again, no systematic pursuit of cultural processes is evident in his research; rather, he seemed to use the term “process” as an ad hoc slogan in his attack upon the rash proposers of scientific laws.

Thus, the history/science dichotomy seems to fail to classify Boas. This is not surprising, since the two concepts are not logical contradictories but only contraries; they are not mutually inclusive of the field. A moment’s reflection reminds that there are many researchers, although few of the stature of Boas, who are neither historians nor scientists as Kroeber and we have defined them. At first, Boas did not understand his former student, as his 1936 retort to Kroeber indicated. However, later, he did understand, and he gave a subtle answer by including in his volume of essays, Race, Language and Culture, “two very early general papers ... because they indicate the general attitude underlying my later work” (Boas 1940: vi).

Let us examine one of these papers, “The Study of Geography,” written in 1887: “The origin of every science we find in two different desires of the human mind, – its aesthetic wants, and its interest in the individual phenomenon.” The aesthetic wants are satisfied by the elimination of confusion and chaos and the institution of order. “The more clearly all phenomena are arranged, the better will the aesthetic desire be satisfied, and for that reason the most general laws and ideas are considered the most valuable results of science” (Boas, 1940:643).

Complementary to the aesthetic wants are the affective ones, which focus on the individual phenomenon as such. Where the physicist, governed by aesthetic desires, views the phenomenon as a specimen of a class, the cosmographer, as Boas termed him, takes the attitude of Goethe:

> It seems to me that every phenomenon, every fact, itself is the really interesting object. Whoever explains it, or connects it with other events, usually only amuses himself or makes sport of us, as, for instance, the naturalist or historian. But a single action or event is interesting, not because it is explainable, but because it is true [Boas 1940:644].

Naturalists and physicists are dissatisfied with the study of geography on two grounds: first, because such study cannot lead to scientific laws; second, because the phenomena studied have no objective unity but only a subjective connection in the mind of the student. Phenomena which have an objective unity may be studied historically, and historical study leads to an objective arrangement which is as pleasing...
to the aesthetic sense as is the formulation of laws. In contrast, the cosmographer values geography as a study of individual phenomena for their own sake, much as does the artist. Boas insisted that no objective decision between these two positions was possible. The choice of the scholar merely revealed the strength of one set of his desires against the other. In himself, Boas at that time saw the affective desires as strongest.

If, now, we were to establish a typology of investigators on the basis jointly of Kroeber’s and Boas’ analyses, we would have three archetypes; scientist, historian, and (let us call him) phenomenalist. The chief function of the last would be, à la Boas, to concentrate on individual phenomena and to criticize scientists and historians for careless and rash generalizations and interpretations. Taken together, the three types of investigators would be complementary; each would be essential to the progress of a discipline such as cultural anthropology; and the sole danger would be the imbalance caused when one type dominated the field for too long a time.

However, it is difficult to know how much importance to give this early declaration by Boas. As an anthropologist, he was, it is true, intensely loyal to the individual phenomenon, whether by temperament (affective desires) or by epistemological conviction (radical empiricism), and this devotion gave his studies their scientific rigor. Yet, despite the 1887 article, his work displayed much of the temper of the scientist, particularly in its method. Also, as we have indicated, his attacks on other scholars did not have the tolerant character of one who feels merely that his temperament or desires are different from the others’. Consequently, it will be useful to postpone judgment until we have discussed other aspects of Boas’ work – his conception of cultural anthropology and his methods.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURE

If one knew of Franz Boas only that he had been trained in the natural sciences, one might have expected his to be a generalizing, abstracting method like that of Durkheim, in which society is considered a reality sui generis and purely social, superindividual laws are sought. But only occasionally, and especially in opposition to racist and environmentalist doctrines, did Boas stress the autonomy of culture and the passivity of the individual (1928:162):

The influence of an individual upon culture depends not only upon his strength but also upon the readiness of society to accept changes. During the unstable conditions of cultural life produced by contact between European and primitive civilizations many native prophets have arisen who have with more or less success modified the religious beliefs of the people. Their revelations, however, were reflexes of the mixed culture. The new ideas created in society are not free, but are determined by the culture in which they arise. The artist is hemmed in by the peculiar style of the art and the techniques of his environment; the religious mind by current belief; the political leader by established political forms.

Strikingly enough, four years later, in the revised edition of the same work (1932), this passage was omitted, and instead there were several pages of examples of cultural changes and the roles played by individuals in the changes.

It fitted with his adherence to radical empiricism that Boas emphasized the reality of the individual and warned against reifying culture. Thus, in both the first and revised editions of Anthropology and Modern Life he declared (1928:235-36; 1932:245-46):

It seems hardly necessary to consider culture a mystic entity that exists outside the society of its individual carriers, and that moves by its own force. The life of a society is carried on by individuals who act singly and jointly under the stress of the tradition in which they have grown up and surrounded by the products of their own activities and those of their forebears. ... The forces that bring about the changes are active in the individuals composing the social groups, not in the abstract culture.

Even in his earliest essays on anthropological theory Boas was oriented social-psychologically. In 1888, when he was still a believer in evolutionary theory, he thought of ethnology as discovering the laws of folk psychology, the laws governing the development of the human mind. And this approach remained when he rejected evolutionary theory. Benedict is in agreement (1943:31):

It has never been sufficiently realized how consistently throughout his life Boas defined the task of ethnology as the study of “man’s mental life,” “fundamental psychic attitudes of cultural groups,” man’s “subjective worlds.”

And Lowie recalls (1947:316-17): “I remember his suddenly electrifying a seminar with the statement that he was concerned with detail only as a way to understanding human mentality.”
Finally, we have, as an illustration from his own writings, a criticism by Boas of the search for sociological laws (1940:258-59):

The problems or the relation of the individual to his culture, to the society in which he lives have received too little attention. The standardized anthropological data that inform us or customary behavior, give no clue to the reaction or the individual to his culture, nor to an understanding of his influence upon it. Still, here lies the sources of a true interpretation or human behavior. It seems a vain effort to search for sociological laws disregarding what should be called social psychology, namely, the reaction of the individual to culture.

Such citations could be multiplied greatly and selected from all periods of his work. Boas’ theoretical orientation to cultural anthropology was social psychological rather than sociological or culture historical.

The same emphasis upon the individual appeared in Boas’ political liberalism. His book, Anthropology and Modern Life, was written “to show that some of the most firmly rooted opinions of our times appear from a wider point of view as prejudices” (1932:5), and the opinions he singled out all bore the stamp of illiberalism. Six of the nine chapters are largely criticisms of the various forms of belief in the overwhelming social importance of heredity. They attacked the belief in the superiority of one race over others; the belief that race and nationality are one; the belief in eugenics; and the belief in the inheritance of criminal traits. In opposition to the belief in the social importance of heredity, Boas urged the importance of social environment, culture. But, cultures could be better or worse, confining to the individual or liberating him. He advocated such (early twentieth-century) liberal notions as: the desirability and inevitability of a world federation of nations; the desirability of individual freedom and the importance of designing education so that it liberates the mind of the child rather than confines it; the lack of tradition and therefore greater wisdom of the urban masses as against the classes; and the unnecessary harshness of contemporary sexual conventions.

Freedom of the individual is the central theme running throughout the book, and it places Boas’ liberalism in the tradition of John Stuart Mill. From this perspective we can better appreciate the attacks in the book, and elsewhere, upon certain kinds of anthropological generalizations. Racist theories, evolutionary theories, geographical, economic, or cultural determinisms, all these minimize the importance, power, and value of the individual. In opposition, Boas felt that the individual was the actor in the adventure of mankind and that, accordingly, each individual should be judged by his actions, not by his nonvoluntary membership in some group or placement in some physical or historical situation.

Thus, when Boas studied, say, North American art, he focused on the individual craftsman and how he, or she, worked within the givens of tradition, tools, and raw material. For example (1940:592):

I have noticed that here, where in a fine imbricated technique color bands are produced, the basket weavers tend to use with great regularity certain groupings of the number of stitches belonging to each color, although, owing to the irregularity of the size of these stitches, these modifications can hardly be observed. If these facts have a wider application, it would seem that on the whole the pleasure given by much of the decorative work of primitive people must not be looked for in the beauty of the finished product, but rather in the enjoyment which the maker feels at his own cleverness in playing with the technical elements he is using.

From this focus on the social psychology of the individual craftsman Boas was able to attack sociological generalizations such as the assertion that in the decorative arts conventional designs develop from the degeneration of representational designs.

Clearly, the power of a social psychological approach, like that of Boas, depends directly upon the adequacy of the social psychology that is employed and elaborated in the course of research. If the anthropologist wishes to study “man’s subjective worlds,” or “fundamental psychic attitudes of cultural groups,” he must have both excellent data and a rich psychological conceptual scheme or theory for handling and interpreting the data. Boas had access to the data. But the tragic flaw in his approach to cultural anthropology was that he operated with a simple-minded, mechanical psychology.

The influence of that psychology was expressed in many areas of his work, but one of the few places where he explicitly sketched it was in the chapter on “Stability of Culture” in Anthropology and Modern Life: Men act largely according to habit. The earlier in life the habit is inculcated, the more difficult is it to alter, the more automatic is its action, and the stronger are the emotions associated with it. Habit is fundamentally activity, not thought; and thought about habitual activity is usually rationalization.
This psychology was not the product of the research of Boas or of his students; it was never tested explicitly in the field or elaborated in consequence. It was one of the psychologies popular in the first quarter of this century, but it was far from being the best social psychology he might have selected. The great contribution of the American interactionist psychologists, Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead, the conception of human interaction as mediated by symbols and as internalized in the form of the self, had escaped him. He was aware of psychoanalysis and accepted the notion that the first few years of life are critical for personality formation, but otherwise he was skeptical of its findings and methods. With such an impoverished view of human nature and human interaction as schematized by his habit psychology, Boas was unable to cope with social phenomena. The result was such a simplistic analysis as the following (1932:142-43):

Intolerance of sharply divided social sets is often based on the strength of automatic reactions and upon the feeling of intense displeasure felt in acts opposed to our own automatism. The apparent fanaticism exhibited in the persecution of heretics must be explained in this manner. At a time when the dogma taught by the Church was imposed upon each individual so intensely that it became an automatic part of his thought and action, it was accompanied by a strong feeling of hostility to anyone who did not participate in this feeling. The term fanaticism does not quite correctly express the attitude of the Inquisition. Its psychological basis was rather the impossibility of changing a habit of thought that had become automatic and the consequent impossibility of new lines of thought, which, for this very reason, seemed antisocial; that is, criminal.

Clearly, Boas lacked the understanding and the conceptual scheme to handle phenomena such as religious beliefs, individual and group interests, bureaucratic organization, etc., that were an integral part of a complex such as the Inquisition.

Since, on the whole, he was dealing with simpler situations than that, and since he was so reluctant to advance a hypothesis publicly, Boas made no glaring errors in his handlings of ethnological materials. But, equally, he contributed no dazzling insights. When he dealt with the fascinating creations of primitive art, he confined himself to the most pedestrian description and analysis. His book on Primitive Art evoked, according to Kroeber, more respect than warmth of appreciation, for he did not deal with cultural or aesthetic values or with style as such. The reason for this deficiency Kroeber traces to “deliberate restraint,” “the ice in his enthusiasm”; he felt that Boas the man was keenly aware of the aesthetic values which as a scientist he could not analyze and so refused to discuss (Kroeber 1943: 25). This was true, but there was more to it than that. As we shall see in the next section, the book was based on the habit psychology we have outlined, and the inadequacies of the psychology are clearly reflected in those of the book.

III. THE METHODS OF INQUIRY

Kroeber typified history and science as seeking contrary goals, and in the first section of this paper we followed his lead. We saw history as seeking to understand the events of a past with their human significances and to convey this understanding to others; science as seeking to describe abstractly and with economy and elegance the processes of any situation of a certain class. But history and science differ not only in goals, they differ typically also in methods.

Since science seeks to generalize about the members of an indefinitely large class, its method emphasizes the notion of replicability. In theory, a scientist can duplicate the manipulations and observations of any other scientist in his discipline and, allowing for the vagaries of chance, emerge with identical findings. If two sets of observations are not in agreement, then the two observers were not really studying events belonging to the same class. Thus, it is a typical problem of science to discover, by criticism of observational techniques, by more refined observation, and by theoretical analysis, why the observations of a class of apparently identical events are at variance with each other.

The historian wishes to understand particular events of human significance (and then to convey this understanding to his audience). This means that his is primarily a task of insightful interpretation of whatever evidence has come to him from the particular past. Since it is a past, and since the events were not conceived of as especially significant until the passage of a long period of time, the evidence desired is usually meager, and the historian must develop his ability to wring the last drop of information from the documents at his disposal. He relies upon his knowledge of human nature generally and of the character of the particular people being studied to aid him in his interpretation. Historians frequently disagree as
to the meanings of particular facts and, accordingly, as to the character of the events that occurred. A disagreement between historians is often attributed to the differences in their basic conceptions of man and society, and such disagreements are not simply resolvable by appeals to the facts.

While much of the data of cultural anthropology is essentially historical in character, the methods by which they are handled are both scientific and historical. A study of the diffusion of, say, pottery styles leans toward the scientific pole. Here the ethnographer is dealing with objects which can be arranged into large classes and considered within each class as substantially identical. The proportions and design of any one pot in a class are the same as those of any other. In contrast, a study of the function and emotional meaning of pottery in the traditional culture based on interviews with a few aged women is essentially historical. The ethnographer, ideally, weighs each informant’s testimony against her character, the interview situation, and the testimony of the others.

Boas thought of his task in scientific terms even when it was clearly historical. For example: He realized the value of collecting as much information as possible from living informants about the vanished or vanishing customs of American Indian groups. Furthermore, as a scientist, he realized that the best data were those which were independent of the observer; this meant exact texts in the language of the native. But, as Radin pointed out, he did not realize that the value of these texts was greatly reduced by the lack of historical method, the lack of background data as to who was the informant, what sort of individual was he, what was the nature of the interview situation, etc. (Radin 1933). Boas the scientist presented his readers with hundreds of pages of texts – the product of the most intensive labor – without the commentary that would have increased their (historical) value and reliability many fold. Moreover, he did not, nor did he encourage his students to, draw the texts and field observations together into carefully wrought description of the way of life of a people.

If we now link these various convictions of Boas together, we will find that they form a chain of conditions so divergent and opposing and so rigid that they make systematic, positive research in cultural anthropology all but impossible. Boas was a scientist in method and temper but not in his goals. He was interested in the individual phenomenon and the individual person, but he rejected historical method, which is adapted to such studies (e.g., the open interview, the biography), in favor of scientific method, and he attempted to work with an impoverished, “scientific” social psychology. His radical empiricism and scientific bent made him comfortable with only the “hardest” of data: skeletal proportions, material objects, texts. But his political liberalism was antagonistic to positive hereditary findings, and he was always seeking to demonstrate that differences apparently due to heredity had actually other causes. Pure distribution studies of designs and of folktales smacked of the superorganic and of reifying cultural processes; he insisted that we needed to find the individuals active behind the cultural process and the reasons for their behavior. Style and folktales are evidences about man’s subjective worlds and the life of the individual but only when interpreted with the aid of historical insight and a rich social psychology. Thus, his divergent, conflicting, iron convictions added up to a set of limiting preconditions for ethnological work that might have broken the spirit of a lesser man.

We can illustrate by a consideration of one of the few works in which his positive, rather than critical, efforts are predominant, *Primitive Art* (1927). Boas’ drive for knowledge of man’s subjective worlds led him to investigate the decorative aspects of primitive art. His habit psychology and his refusal to make insightful interpretations handicapped him severely, but he doubtless feared that better vehicles would prove less governable and would propel him willy-nilly into the morass of aesthetic criticism or the quicksands of culture history.

Let us trace the principal argument of the chapter on “Style”: Boas began by considering the influence of traditional or habitual motor habits on the design of various artifacts. Weapons, household furniture, clothes, and tools are designed in consonance with the habitual acts of which they are an element. When an act has been habitual since childhood, there is an emotional attachment to it and resistance to change; so, too, there will be an emotional attachment to the design of the artifacts customarily utilized, even when the design of the artifact is not critical to the execution of the action. When the raw material from which the artifact has been made is changed, there will be an attempt to impose the old designs upon the new material. Boas then recalled an argument of
the preceding chapters: as a craftsman works upon an object, he modifies or produces a surface; if he is highly skilled, a virtuoso, the surface produced is so regular as to be aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, the virtuoso will often play with his material, thus producing an intricate pattern. Such patterns may then, later, be transferred to a new medium, e.g., from cloth to pottery.

Here the principal argument of the chapter ended. Boas admitted that he had not explained the variation in style from group to group, technical conditions being otherwise similar. But, in his usual fashion, he concluded that the subject was complex and that it was doubtful whether all the factors would be fully elucidated.

We note how his analysis mirrored his social psychology in its emphasis upon ingrained habit, upon the dominance of motor habits over intellectual processes, and upon the emotional attachment to tradition. Boas’ approach was adequate, perhaps, to a discussion of the craftsman who amuses himself with his own dexterity, but it fails completely in interpreting styles or genuine artistry. The artist, in contrast to Boas’ craftsman, is aware of himself and of an audience for his creation. He looks at his work from the point of view of his audience, and he directs his virtuosity toward the creation of forms that, he anticipates, will have certain kinds of impact upon the audience. (Of course, many craftsmen will possess artistic self-consciousness although in weaker degree than the true artist.) But Boas could not perceive or discuss this essential ingredient of art: in his psychology the individual is dominated by habit; the individual has no self and cannot interact with himself in order to so control his actions as to produce forms whose impact he can anticipate.

Since he would not interpret historically, with insight, Boas could not cope with the richness of emotional and intellectual meanings in a cultural style. Even in the case of the Indians of the Northwest Coast, whom he had studied for so many years, he could not discuss the significances, values, meanings, and functions of their dramatic carvings. Viewed objectively, as the product of great labor by a distinguished anthropologist, *Primitive Art* was a failure. But, when we understand the self-imposed restraints, it was a triumph that he produced anything at all on the subject.

Given these restraints, Boas’ *forte* was criticism. He was a master at exposing the generalization that was false to the phenomena, or that explained away a serious problem by reifying culture, or that was constructed in violation of the canons of scientific method. In so far as his targets were would-be scientists relying upon inadequate data and slipshod methods, his criticism was healthful for the growing discipline. But cultural anthropology also required positive leadership, and here Boas failed.

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