Columbia University's Franz Boas: He Led the Undoing of Scientific Racism

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Columbia University's Franz Boas: He Led the Undoing of Scientific Racism

Editor's Note: *Two hundred fifty years ago scholars in the West divided mankind into two categories. On the one hand there was the black man who was said to be subhuman and of lower intelligence and therefore a natural slave. Then there was the white man who uniquely possessed the glorious traits of Newton and Milton. Here is the story of Franz Boas, the Columbia University sociologist who was largely responsible for destroying the academic consensus that blacks were a lower order of humanity.*

by Lee D. Baker

BY THE END of the eighteenth century a whole new body of intellectual endeavors termed "science" had begun to emerge as a distinct domain of Western culture that challenged theology and moral philosophy. Enlightenment writers saw science emanating from the "rational mind of man" unfettered by emotion or superstition, and by the middle of the eighteenth century science was becoming a dominant discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. Between the middle of the eighteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth century, science played an important role in establishing the "fact" that savages were racially inferior to members of civilized society. During the second half of the eighteenth century continental scholars such as Louis LeClerc, Comte de Buffon, and Johann Blumenbach fused their aesthetic judgments and ethnocentrism to form an elaborate system to classify the races into a rigid, hierarchical scheme. In North America this scientific system, coupled with colonists' popular thinking about racial hierarchies, buoyed existing power relationships, political goals, and economic interests, which in turn institutionalized racial inferiority and socially structured the categories in new and enduring ways.

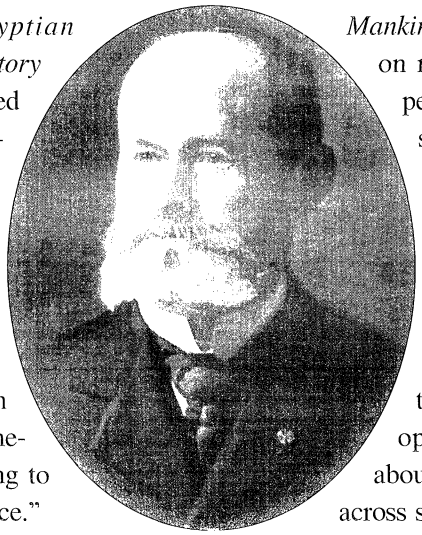
European scientists' ideas about racial inferiority became more influential in North America as revolutionary fervor began to sweep the colonies. As English and colonial relations became more antagonistic, revolutionary philosophies about citizens' rights, freedom, and liberty rose to a crescendo. The duplicitous contradiction of fighting the tyranny of England while denying freedom to enslaved Africans fueled antislavery attempts to challenge the institution of slavery. The morality claim presented by abolitionists was eviscerated by using scientific studies about racial inferiority to explain that Negroes and Indians were savages not worthy of citizenship or freedom. The abolition movement was not easily curbed. At the dawn of the Civil War, abolitionists insisted on juxtaposing the institution of slavery with the ideology of democracy, but this only motivated proslavery forces to construct an even more elaborate edifice of race ideology.

The so-called American school of anthropology was developed in the midst of the political, financial, and ideological unrest that led to the Civil War. Until the mid-nineteenth century most scientists explained racial inferiority in terms of the "savages'" fall from grace or of their position in the "Great Chain of Being." The idea of monogenesis — that Negroes were fully human — was integral to both paradigms. U.S. scientists, however, revived earlier ideas of polygenesis — multiple origins of the human species — in the wake of the growing antislavery forces and slave revolts. The proponents of these arguments eclipsed the single-origin thesis prior to and following the Civil War, even after Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) should have abated them. The first American anthropologists advanced the polygenesis thesis within the highly politicized antebellum period, and these efforts were aimed at setting Negroes apart from whites and defining the Negro's place in nature. The most influential scholars of this school were Samuel Morton, Josiah Nott, and Louis Agassiz.

"The morality claim presented by abolitionists was eviscerated by using scientific studies about racial inferiority to explain that Negroes and Indians were savages not worthy of citizenship or freedom."

Samuel Morton was a Philadelphia physician who also taught anatomy to medical students. He curated, for his private use, one of the world's foremost collections of

human skulls. He used his collection as a database to write two major publications, *Crania Americana; or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (1839) and *Crania Ægyptiaca; or, Observations on Egyptian Ethnography, Derived from Anatomy, History and the Monuments* (1844). Morton linked cranial capacity with moral and intellectual endowments and assembled a cultural ranking scheme that placed the large-brained Caucasoid at the pinnacle. The impact of his research is reflected in a memoir published in the *Charleston Medical Journal* after his death in 1851: "We can only say that we of the South should consider him [Morton] as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race."



Daniel G. Brinton
Professor of ethnology at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia

"The true Negroes are passionately fond of music, singing, and dancing."

Josiah Nott was trained by Morton and was another physician who contributed to the original American school of anthropology. Nott hailed from Alabama and desperately believed that Negroes and whites were separate species. In numerous publications and lectures during the 1840s, Nott discussed the natural inferiority of the Negro in an explicit effort to help proslavery forces fend off the abolitionist movement. Nott advanced theories that were used widely to continue the enslavement of African Americans. One of the most pervasive was the idea that Negroes were like children who needed direction, discipline, and the parent-like care of a master. Negroes, he argued, were better off enslaved because this imposed at least a modicum of civilized culture. This very theme was recycled time and time again over the next 80 years by various public intellectuals and politicians during and after Reconstruction.

"What unhappiness for the white race to have tied their existence so closely with that of Negroes."

In 1854 Congress repealed the Missouri Compromise, enabling the new territorial governments of Kansas and Nebraska to decide the slavery question under the theory of popular sovereignty. A mini civil war erupted instead of elections; known as Bleeding Kansas, it was a prelude to the Civil War. Also in 1854, Nott and George Gliddon compiled the available anthropological data on species variations for *Types of Mankind*, a celebrated book with 10 editions by the end of the century. *Types of Mankind* was perhaps the most important book on race during the contentious antebellum period. Its "quantitative" data were used to strengthen proslavery arguments by scholars and laypeople alike.

On the heels of Nott and Gliddon's first edition, and in the middle of the escalating tensions between the North and the South, the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857). Chief Justice Roger B. Taney authored the majority opinion, which was supposed to be only about the right of a manumitted slave to sue across state lines in federal court. By broadening the scope of the case Taney decreed that all African Americans (enslaved or free) had no rights as citizens under the U.S. Constitution. Taney framed his argument by detailing how "far below" Negroes were from whites "in the scale of created beings," in effect constitutionalizing the racial ideology articulated by the scientific discourse and the opinion of proslavery interests.

The third and most prominent contributor to this American school of anthropology was the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz. Agassiz hailed from Switzerland and was an expert in paleontological ichthyology. In 1846 he was invited to join the faculty of Harvard University, where he developed an interest in the origins of the human species. Initially he advanced the single-origin or monogenesis approach. After four years in the racially charged antebellum climate, however, he underwent a conversion that led him to believe Negroes were a separate species altogether. Two important events led to this conversion. The first was meeting Samuel Morton and viewing his collection of skulls in Philadelphia. The second event also occurred in Philadelphia. Apparently, Agassiz had his first encounter with African Americans in a hotel in Philadelphia, and he was disturbed by their features. When a black waiter approached his table, he wanted to flee. "What unhappiness for the white race," he exclaimed, "to have tied their

Photo:American Philosophical Society.

existence so closely with that of Negroes. . . . [T]his [is a] degraded and degenerate race."

Agassiz's legacy is not only the statues, schools, streets, and museums in Cambridge emblazoned with his name but also the bevy of students who were under his tutelage at Harvard University. He trained virtually all of the prominent U.S. professors of natural history during the second half of the nineteenth century. Nathaniel Southgate Shaler and Joseph Le Conte were two of his students who became influential in the political debates concerning racial inferiority.

"In relation to mental capacity, the European or white race stands at the head of the list, the African or Negro at its foot."

As anthropology emerged in the United States as a discipline in the late nineteenth century, only a handful of ethnologists were influential in shaping it. The most influential were naturalist and explorer John Wesley Powell, who was the research leader, Frederic Ward Putnam, the museum builder whose academic focus was American archaeology, and Daniel G. Brinton, the academician who was professor of ethnology at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. Between 1889 and 1898 each held the presidency of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), then the most powerful scientific organization in the United States. Although none of these ethnologists was a strict Social Darwinist in the Spencerian tradition, each was an evolutionist advancing ideas of the superiority and inferiority of particular races when Social Darwinism was a dominant ideology in the United States.

The pivotal publication that solidified Brinton's national reputation seems to have been *Races and Peoples*. The book was a series of lectures on ethnography that consolidated the "latest and most accurate researches." The first chapter, "Lectures on Ethnography," begins with a survey of craniology detailing a range of features used to classify and rank races. These characteristics included: cranial capacity, color, muscular structure, vital powers, and sexual preference. He summarized these under the subheading "Physical Criteria of Racial Superiority" and concluded: "We are accustomed familiarly to speak of 'higher' and 'lower' races, and we are justified in this even from merely physical considerations. These indeed bear intimate relations to mental capacity. . . . Measured by these criteria, the European or white race stands at the head of the list, the African or negro at its foot."

The tradition of racist imagery in the United States is long, of course, and Brinton wove together science and imagery found in widely circulated magazines, minstrel shows, and the Uncle Tom's Cabin shows that were crisscrossing the country. Old stereotypes became scientific fact. Some were blatant: Brinton suggested that "the true Negroes are passionately fond of music, singing and dancing." Other statements were subtle but caustic. Brinton reproduced the stock stereotypes the entertainment and advertising industries had found profitable, including the idea that African Americans resembled apes. Brinton reiterated this image in his scheme for measuring cranial capacities and facial angles by placing the "African negro midway between the Orang-utang and the European white." In another text he unabashedly stated that "the African black . . . presents many peculiarities which are termed 'pithecoid' or apelike."

The parallels are striking. Brinton stated that the "Hottentot is rather a hopeless case for civilization efforts. He hates profoundly work, either physical or mental, and is passionately fond of rum and tobacco"; social equality among the races is not possible because of the *natural* inequality between the races. Such was the line of thought articulated by the Supreme Court when it interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment in *Plessy*. The Court decided that the amendment was intended to enforce equality between the two races before the law. The amendment was not intended to impose an unnatural or impossible social equality. Just as Brinton elicited the notion of evolutionary rungs, Justice Brown used the term *plane* to evoke a similar symbol of racial inequality.

"The African black presents many peculiarities which are termed 'pithecoid' or apelike."

Brinton did not stop at perpetuating racist stereotypes to buttress the logic for racial segregation. He provided the "scientific" justification for the "lynch law." The number of lynchings was steadily increasing in 1890, when *Races and Peoples* was published. The Republicans had just lost control of Congress, cotton prices were plummeting, and

the acts to secure African-American suffrage were on the chopping block. Terrorists of the Democratic Party effectively used the lynch law to ensure home rule and white supremacy. In both popular and scientific literature African-American men, in particular, were depicted as savages who harbored a bestial lust for white women. These depravities, many believed, could be curbed only by sadistic tortures and lynchings. The routine violence perpetrated by lynch mobs was always portrayed as justice served in the name of chivalry and the "protection" of white southern women. Brinton goaded white supremacists with one more justification:

> It cannot be too often repeated, too emphatically urged, that it is to the women alone of the highest race that we must look to preserve the purity of the type, and with it the claims of the race to be the highest. They have no holier duty, no more sacred mission, than that of transmitting in its integrity the heritage of ethnic endowment gained by the race throughout thousands of generations of struggle. . . . The philanthropy is false, that religion is rotten, which would sanction a white woman enduring the embrace of a colored man.

After *Races and Peoples* was published, the president of the AAAS issued a call for laws and educational reform which applied the scientific fact that Negroes were inferior. That same year the highest court in the land seemingly answered the call and ruled on *Plessy*, thereby codifying into constitutional law the idea of racial inferiority that forced African Americans into inferior schools, bathrooms, and the train cars of Jim Crow.

"That religion is rotten which would sanction a white woman enduring the embrace of a colored man."

Lewis Henry Morgan also made a tremendous contribution to the foundations of U.S. ethnology, and in 1879 he was the first in a line of ethnologists to use the presidency of the AAAS as a bully pulpit to validate and legitimate ethnology in the United States. A longtime resident of upstate New York, he was trained in law, served in the state assembly and senate, and invested in railroads serving the Great Lakes region. He thus argued that there was a correlation between "cranial capacity" and social as well as technological development, asserting the belief that contemporary races were arranged hierarchically and reflected different stages in the evolution to civilization. Though similar to Herbert Spencer's ideas of the racial-cultural evolution, Morgan differed because he linked cultural evolution to materialist development. He claimed that the development of technology and modes of production led to civilization, which suggested that races of people were not necessarily shackled to a permanent status of inferiority.

Nathaniel Southgate Shaler was initially trained by Louis Agassiz and became a geographer, geologist, and dean of the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University. By the turn of the century he was one of the most respected scholars in the country. Powell, who was always looking, found powerful support in Shaler.

Shaler also reproduced the image that the affairs of "darkies" inevitably degenerate into chaos:

> But experience shows us that if we could insulate a single county in the South, and give it over to negroes alone, we should in a few decades find that his European clothing, woven by generations of education, had fallen away, and the race gone down to a much lower state of being than that it now occupies. In other words, the negro is not as yet intellectually so far up in the scale of development as he appears to be; in him the great virtues of the superior race, though implanted, have not yet taken firm root, and are in need of constant tillage, lest the old savage weeds overcome the tender shoots of the new and unnatural culture.

Moreover, Shaler presented the stereotype of Negroes' mythic sense of rhythm as science:

> There are reasons for believing that the negroes can readily be cultivated in certain departments of thought in which the emotions lend aid to labor; as, for instance, in music. There is hardly any doubt that they have a keener sense of rhythm than whites of the same intellectual grade, — perhaps than any grade whatever. . . . [T]hese considerations lead me to think that music may be one of the lines on which careful inquiry may develop great possibilities for the race.

In "The Negro Problem" (1884), published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Shaler offered a scientific rationale to support disfranchisement and segregation. He based the article on a common premise that African Americans were inherently incapable of shouldering the responsibility of citizenship. The dean of the Lawrence Scientific School reported to the American public that African Americans were "a folk, bred first in a savagery that had never been broken by the least effort towards a higher state, and then in a slavery that tended almost as little to fit them for a place in the structure of a self-controlling society. Surely, the effort to blend these two people by a proclamation and a constitutional amendment will sound strangely in the time to

come. . . . [R]esolutions cannot help this rooted nature of man." Based on this framework, Shaler justified the many statutes declaring Negroes "unfit" to vote, sit on juries, and testify against white persons in a court of law, explaining, "I hold it to be clear that the inherited qualities of the negroes to a great degree unfit them to carry the burden of our own civilization."

"The inferiority of the Negro race, as compared with the white race, is so essentially true, and so obvious, that . . . it cannot be justly attributed to prejudice."

Shaler was the decipherer of science for the nation and the instructor of more than 7,000 Harvard graduates; he dispensed racial stereotypes in the classroom as science and saturated the most popular monthly publications with the same. More than Brinton, Powell, and Putnam, it was Shaler who marshaled anthropological ideas to sway public opinion against Negro suffrage. Shaler was a self-proclaimed "practical anthropologist." By articulating the racial plank of Social Darwinism he helped foster the acquiescence of the North to southern ideas of racial inferiority and provided the scientific stamp of approval for McKinley's overtures to white supremacy, the Republican Party's abandonment of African-American interests, widespread disfranchisement, and Jim Crow segregation.

Anthropology, at the turn of the century, was not distributed to the American public in magazines by anthropologists. It was appropriated and then rearticulated by policy pundits and legislators. Senators and House representatives were perhaps the most powerful people to use ideas generated by anthropologists in these magazines. They used ethnology to sway public opinion in the North and fuel race antipathy in the South. In this respect, legislators contributed to the anthropological discourse on race while making it even more valid.

Senator John T. Morgan from Alabama warned the audience of *Arena* "that there is extreme danger, under existing conditions, in confiding to negro voters the representation of white families in the ballot box." He wanted to make it clear that the tactics of disfranchisement were not born of southern prejudice but were implemented because "the inferiority of the Negro race, as compared with the white race, is so essentially true, and so obvious, that, . . . [it] cannot be justly attributed to prejudice." Morgan illustrated how obvious this inferiority was by using rhetoric similar to that of Brinton and McGee:

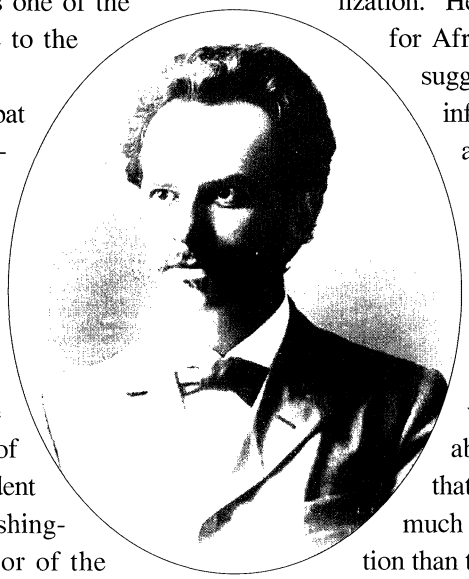
> The mental differences and differing traits, including the faculty of governing, forecast, enterprise, and the wide field of achievement in the arts and sciences, are accurately measured by the contrast of the civilization of the United States, with the barbarism of Central Africa. . . . The negro race, in their native land, have never made a voluntary and concerted effort to rise above the plain of slavery; they have not contributed a thought, or a labor, except by compulsion, to the progress of civilization. Nothing has emanated from the negroes of Africa, in art, science, or enterprise that has been of the least service to mankind. Their own history, at home, demonstrates their inferiority when compared with that of other peoples. . . . Their social development has never risen so high as to repress human sacrifices and cannibalism; while their religion is a witchcraft that is attended with every brutal crime.

Jabez L.M. Curry was the general agent for both the Peabody Education Fund and the John F. Slater Education Fund. In 1899 he also had the distinction of being one of the two surviving organizers of the Confederate government. Curry was an influential leader in the South and an expert on Negro education, and he shaped the philanthropic policies for Negro education. In 1899 he shared his expertise on the Negro with the audience of *Popular Science Monthly* by writing a timely article on "The Negro Question." The article was intended to explain the differences between "the Caucasian and the negro" in an effort to marshal evidence to support African-American disfranchisement. The differences, Curry explained, were born of "irreconcilable racial characteristics and diverse historical antecedents." Curry introduced the article with a short historical description of what he called the Negro menace from colonial times through Reconstruction. He asserted that Negroes were racially inferior and did not possess the moral and intellectual fortitude to participate in the political process. To support this assertion, he turned to anthropological notions of race:

> Ethnologically they are nearly polar opposites. With the Caucasian progress has been upward. Whatever is great in art, invention, literature, science, civilization, religion, has characterized him. In his native land the negro has made little or no advancement for nearly four hundred years. Surrounded by and in contact with a higher civilization, he has not invented a machine, nor painted a picture, nor written a book, nor organized a stable government, nor constructed a code of laws. . . . For thousands of years there lies behind the race one dreary, unrelieved, monotonous chapter of ignorance, nakedness, superstition, savagery. All efforts to reclaim, civilize, Christianize, have been disastrous failures.

Franz Boas was born in Minden, Germany, on July 9, 1858, the same year as Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel; Booker T. Washington and Sigmund Freud were two years older than he, and John Dewey was a year his junior. Boas grew up in financially secure, socially and intellectually rich surroundings; however, he faced prejudice, anti-Semitism, and political persecution as a young Jew in Bismarck Germany, which was one of the factors that motivated him to migrate to the United States.

As early as 1887 Boas began to combat scientific racism by challenging museum organizers' representations of other cultures. He argued that arranging artifacts into categories depicting degrees of savagery, barbarism, or civilization employed a fraudulent logic "not founded on the phenomenon, but in the mind of the student." The debates were conducted through letters to the editor of *Science*, involving Otis T. Mason, president of the Anthropological Society of Washington, and John Wesley Powell, director of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Boas argued that an "ethnological phenomenon is not expressed by its appearance, by the state in which it *is*, but by its whole history[;] . . . therefore arguments from analogies of the outward appearance, such as shown in Professor Mason's collections, are deceptive." Boas' logic became a cornerstone for the inductive ethnographic studies that he and his students pursued.



Franz Boas

"Boas demonstrated that there was considerable overlap of so-called racial characteristics."

In 1894 Boas delivered his first public address in which he outlined the racism of the dominant anthropological discourse. "Human Faculty as Determined by Race," delivered to Section H of the AAAS, raised this question: Does race limit the ability to achieve civilization? Boas warned, cautiously, that the problem with simple evolutionary theories was the liability "to interpret as racial character what is only an effect of social surroundings."

He detailed how various civilizations arose either independently or through cultural diffusion and emphasized that civilizations arose in various parts of the world regardless of racial disposition. Although deferring to findings of physical anthropologists about racial inferiority, Boas demonstrated there was considerable overlap of so-called racial characteristics, imploring that no fact "has been found yet which would prove beyond a doubt that it will be impossible for certain races to attain a higher civilization." He also explained that the primary reason for African-American inequality was racism, suggesting "that the old race-feeling of the inferiority of the colored race is as potent as ever and is a formidable obstacle to its advance and progress." He advised scientists to focus on how much Negroes have "accomplished in a short period against heavy odds" because "it is hardly possible to say what would become of the negro if he were able to live with the whites on absolutely equal terms." Boas concluded that "historical events appear to have been much more potent in leading races to civilization than their faculty, and it follows that achievements of races do not warrant us to assume that one race is more highly gifted than the other."

Boas approach was a direct challenge to most anthropologists during that period. Boas' arguments at this point did not have a significant impact on the scientific community and did not circulate in the more popular scientific magazines.

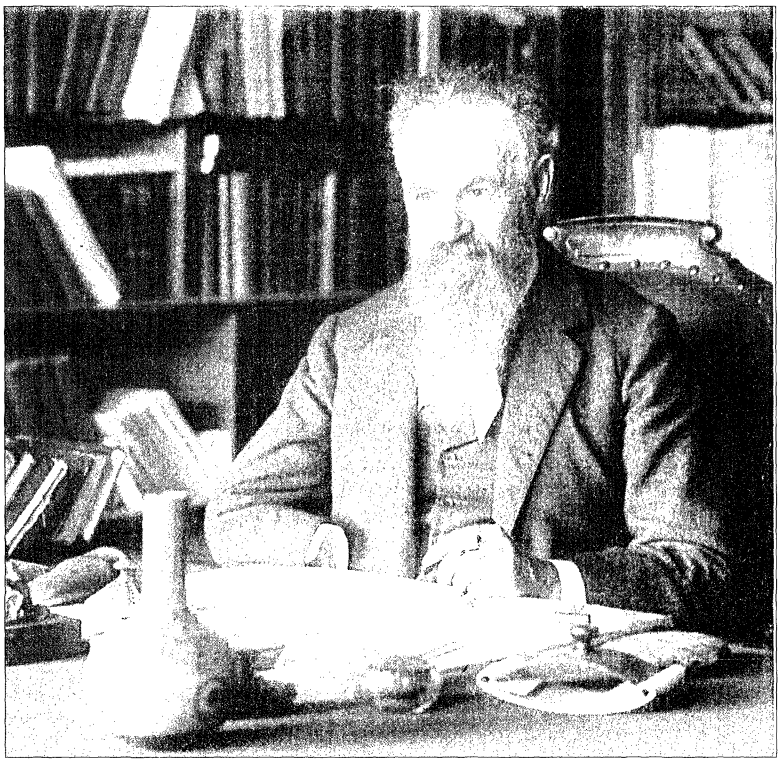
During the first decade of the twentieth century Boas began to take over and centralize the leadership of his field. He effectively directed the anthropology of race away from theories of evolution and guided it to a consensus that African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color were not racially inferior and possessed unique and historically specific cultures. These cultures, he argued, were particular to geographic areas, local histories, and traditions. Furthermore, one could not project a value of higher or lower on these cultures — cultures were relative.

Franz Boas began to drive a wedge into the solid construct of race when he courageously challenged the ascendancy of ideas of racial inferiority within the academy. His wedge did not fracture it: Only after the studies pioneered

Photo:American Philosophical Society.

by Boas and W.E.B. Du Bois were appropriated by African-American intellectuals engaged in the processes of razing America's racial edifice did anthropology turn the corner and begin to be used in the struggle against racial inequality.

Although anthropology continued to merge with nativism and reinforce racism well into the 1920s, much of its racial discourse had been redirected by 1910. Boas orchestrated this shift in racial theory within anthropology by distinguishing race from culture and language and by proving that racial hierarchies were scientifically untenable. With the help of his students he effectively orchestrated a paradigmatic shift in the discipline and subsequently in the social sciences, and the Supreme Court eventually embraced the "new" scientific claims about racial equality, ending Jim Crow segregation in public schools in 1954.



John Wesley Powell

Boas' contributions were singularly significant, but he did not work alone. Without the wider social and political efforts of Du Bois, the NAACP, and scholars at Howard University, Boas' contributions to the changing signification of race would have been limited to the academy. The only way to fully understand the important role social science played in *Brown* is to examine the early relationship between anthropology and the NAACP, and the only way to do that is to explore the unique relationship between Du Bois and Boas in the first decade of the twentieth century. The efforts of Boas and Du Bois to change how scientists and the public understood race and culture were not simply efforts to shift a paradigm, they were struggles to secure the principles of democracy.

Boas' reputation began to grow and he became viewed by African-American leaders as an ally in the struggle for racial equality because of his antiracist research and theories. Boas was also eager to build alliances and strengthen his ties with civil rights leaders. He appears to have been initially unaware of the various strategies used by African-American leaders to alleviate racial inequality, for he attempted to build alliances with both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Ultimately, however, he allied himself with Du Bois and became associated with the radical integrationist arm of the movement. The relationship Boas formed with Du Bois and the NAACP alienated him from the accommodationist wing of the movement led by Washington and financed by Andrew Carnegie. It, in effect, cut off Boas from possible funding from Carnegie.

While Du Bois and his associates began to gain prominence, the vast majority of African Americans continued to claim Washington as their leader. Few whites ventured into matters of race relations without his counsel. Franz Boas was no exception. In 1904 Boas wrote to Washington concerning the admission of an African-American student into the graduate anthropology program at Columbia University:

> Dear Sir,
> A young gentleman, Mr. J.E. Aggrey, of Livingston College, Salisbury, N.C., desires to study anthropology at Columbia University. He is a full-blood negro. . . . I very much hesitate to advise the young man to take up this work, because I fear that it would be very difficult after he has completed his studies to find a place. On the other hand, it might perhaps be possible for him to study for two or three years and take his degree of master of arts, and then to obtain a position in one of the schools for his people.

Boas must not have been fully aware of Washington's strategy, which emphasized vocational training and devalued university education. If Boas had been, he

Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

would have been able to predict Washington's response:

> Judging by what you state in your letter and knowing what I do, I cannot rid myself of the feeling that the course which he [Aggrey] is planning to take, will be of little value to him.
>
> At the present time I know of so many cases where young colored men and women would have done well had they thoroughly prepared themselves for teachers, some kind of work in the industries, or in the applied sciences, but instead, they have made the mistake of taking a course that had no practical bearing on the needs of the race; the result being they ended up as hotel-waiters or Pullman car porters.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Du Bois' initial contact with Boas was a letter written on October 11, 1905. In it he explained the hundred-year study and asked Boas to participate in the eleventh conference, which was on the Negro physique. Boas accepted the invitation and also delivered the 1906 commencement address for Atlanta University. In the speech he empowered African Americans by saying that their ancestors contributed greatly to the civilization of the human race. He explained that "while much of the history of early invention is shrouded in darkness, it seems likely that at a time when the European was still satisfied with crude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron." Boas also used other examples: the military organization of the Zulu, the advanced economic and judicial system of the Negro Kingdoms of the Sudan, and the innovative bronze casting of Benin. He further appealed: "If, therefore, it is claimed that your race is doomed to economic inferiority, you may confidently look to the home of your ancestors and say that you have set out to recover for the colored people the strength that was their own before they set foot on the shores of this continent."

St. Clair Drake has suggested that the Atlanta University address clearly placed Boas and early anthropology at Columbia right in the middle of the "vindication struggle." It also placed Boas squarely within the integrationist, radical, and anti-Washington wing of the struggle for racial equality. And it had a tremendous impact on Du Bois. In *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939) he reflected on what a profound contribution Boas made to his own view of the African world:

> Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching History in 1906 and said to the graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted. JBHE

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This article is adapted from Lee. D. Baker's From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954 *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Reprinted with permission.*

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