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Franz Boas: Between Anti-Racism and Reification

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Abstract

Franz Boas has often been lauded for his anti-racist stance. A closer look at his scholarship suggests that he was, at best, inconsistent in this regard, especially in terms of his engagements with Afro-Americans versus Native Americans. We examine his collecting practices, in particular his acquisition of human remains, during his early research trips, arguing that these reveal quite problematic attitudes towards Native Americans. We frame our arguments by drawing on Axel Honneth's recognition theory and his distinctions between recognition, reification and objectification. We contend that Boas's work was, despite his many important contributions, also pervaded by epistemic and structural violence.

Keywords:

Boas, collecting, recognition, objectification, reification, anti-racism

Zusammenfassung

Franz Boas ist oft für seine antirassistische Haltung gelobt worden. Ein genauerer Blick auf seine wissenschaftliche Arbeit zeigt jedoch, dass er in dieser Hinsicht bestenfalls inkonsequent war, vor allem in Bezug auf seine Auseinandersetzung mit Afroamerikaner*innen und Native Americans. Wir untersuchen Boas' Sammelpraktiken, insbesondere von menschlichen Überresten während seiner frühen Forschungsreisen. Diese Unternehmungen offenbaren eine sehr problematische Haltung gegenüber Native Americans. Wir bauen unsere Argumentation auf Axel Honneths Anerkennungstheorie auf, sowie seinen Unterscheidungen zwischen Anerkennung, Verdinglichung und Objektivierung. Trotz der zahlreichen, wichtigen Beiträge zur Anthropologie war seine wissenschaftliche Arbeit auch von epistemischer und struktureller Gewalt durchdrungen.

Schlüsselwörter:

Boas, Sammeln, Anerkennung, Objektivierung, Reifizierung, Antirassismus

Franz Boas has long been a central figure in anthropology in the U.S., often considered the founder of the discipline. Nonetheless, both during his lifetime and since his passing, Boas has been a controversial personage. Within anthropology he has been celebrated as a major proponent of a four-field approach and a holistic discipline that was, and for some practitioners still is, an ultimate desideratum. He stands for cultural relativism, which has long allowed anthropologists to claim a non-ethnocentric and non-racist (if not anti-racist) standpoint (Baker 1998, 99–126). But he has also been flayed, especially within processual archaeology, as a particularist who took a highly empirical approach based on inductive logic and who argued vigorously against social evolutionary thought, albeit in its 19th-century Spencerian form. Boas's reach went well beyond anthropology as an academic discipline. In 1919, in a letter to the editor of the weekly news magazine *The Nation*, he wrote disapprovingly of the engagement of some

anthropologists in espionage orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Boas 1919, cited in Stocking 1992, 116–117), an intervention that led to his censure by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in the aftermath of World War I.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Boas and his legacy also had a prominent place in the 2021 Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the AAA (Gupta/Stoolman 2022). The talk was designed to critique the state of U.S.-based anthropology, focusing on what the authors argued to be missed opportunities to grapple with a disciplinary and societal legacy of colonialism and racism, despite the promising beginnings of scholars such as Boas. Although portraying Boas's perspectives in a quite positive light, they also noted that the 'problem with this focus on Boas as a founding figure lies both in the fact that so much of it slips into hagiography and in that it shares in a problematic "Big Man" view of history' (Gupta/Stoolman 2022, 781). The address provoked a string of replies – and replies to replies – that circulated on the AAA listserv for some time after the meeting, while others have subsequently been published in *American Anthropologist* (2023). While some writers took umbrage at what they perceived to be insults to the field and the 'founding fathers,' others noted that one of the chief problems lies with the persistent dichotomy between those who study – the (white) anthropologists – and those who are the objects of study, whether Native Americans, African Americans or others.

In this brief contribution, we draw on related issues, focusing especially on an apparent paradox in Boas's career: his oft-cited status as explicitly anti-racist, on the one hand, and his anthropological collecting practices on the other. We consider these seemingly contradictory stances through the lens of Axel Honneth's distinctions between recognition, objectification and reification. Our goal is neither to portray Boas as a demon nor as a hero but rather to expose some facets of the complex and contradictory figure that he was. Although the focus is on Boas as an individual, he – no more than anyone else – stood outside his social and political milieu. Many of the problems we point to here are just as much applicable to anthropology and anthropologists in general at the time – and, in some different forms, today as well.

A question of recognition

Scholars in many fields have grappled with questions of how to understand the nature and ethics of intersub-

jective relations. Dwight Conquergood (1985) writes of ethnographers' dilemmas in steering a course between detachment and commitment to the people with whom they work and between identity and difference. He advocates 'dialogic performance' in which the aim is 'to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another' (Conquergood 1985, 9), so that the ethnographer 'speaks to and with' (Conquergood 1985, 10) rather than for others.

Here, we draw on the approach promoted by the philosopher Axel Honneth, who comes in a different way to a related position. Based on a reading of György Lukács's work, Honneth (2005) proposes that *Anerkennung* [*tr.* recognition] is the foundation of intersubjective relations. Recognition involves the ability of a subject to adopt the perspective of an Other, an ability that is tied to processes of ontogenesis (Tomasello 2010). This relationship implies the capability to see oneself through the eyes of others, making social life a highly complex affair. Many psychological theories start out by reflecting on the relation between subjects and objects as a simple subject-surrounding world relation, which is the first step of orientation in one's life and thus of knowing an object world (Habermas 1999). In contrast, Honneth presumes that intersubjective relations precede subject-object ones. The perspectival flexibility of *Anerkennung* comes before *Ken-
nen* [*tr.* cognition].¹ Knowing, or cognition, takes a crucial turn when it concerns not the world of lifeless things but an Other. People become reified, things to be known, a tendency sharply criticized by Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1971), the book that is at the basis of Honneth's critical reassessment. Lukács argues that *Verdinglichung* [*tr.* reification] is driven to high levels in capitalist modes of production, where, for example, workers are reduced to material means for producing *Mehrwert* [*tr.* surplus value].

Honneth extends the economic core of Lukács's argument to the social realm, including all social sciences and humanities, anthropology included. In these scholarly disciplines, people become the target of cognition: objects instead of subjects. In much academic research, the original nature of intersubjective relations is forgotten. A well-known study of this process is Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (Fabian 2014), which contains the notion of 'object' in its subtitle.

¹ It is difficult to translate his difference between *Anerkennung* and *Ken-
nen* in their full meaning into English. In the latter case, 'knowing' may be as appropriate as 'cognition,' the term we use here.

However, according to Honneth, there is an important middle ground between recognition and reification. He calls this ‘objectification.’ Objectification incorporates an epistemic position of seeking to know Others through observation that is characteristic of scientific as well as other endeavours. Objectification includes an instrumental, distanced relation to Others who become more objects than subjects. However, objectification is not identical to reification because the former remains cognizant of the potential subject status of the Other; objectification is in this sense ‘a recognition-sensitive form of knowing,’ a position that Honneth (2005, 67) proposes to distinguish fundamentally from reification. Academic disciplines typically vacillate between such objectifying and reifying positions. Archaeology, for example, passed from a dominantly reifying epistemological discourse (processual archaeology) to a more objectifying one (postprocessual archaeology), at times even a recognitional one, especially in feminist writings (e.g., Spector 1993). Nowadays, the pendulum swings back to reification, in part because of the growing influence of natural sciences on archaeological interpretation.

In a related fashion to Honneth, Nancy Fraser (2000) centers recognition in her feminist-inspired examination of difference and the problems of reification and massive inequality. She focuses on *mis*recognition as ‘an institutionalized relation of social subordination’ in which a person or group is ‘denied the status of a full partner in social interaction’ (Fraser 2000, 113).

In a recent paper, one of us has argued that violence – structural, epistemic and the like – is characterized by the absence of an awareness of recognition in intersubjective encounters, that is, in cases of reification (Bernbeck 2020). While objectification does not reach the level of true recognition, it may be non-violent when there is a consciousness of the ‘primacy of a recognitional position’ (Bernbeck 2020, 23). We use this conceptual background in order to reflect further on the practice and politics of Boas’s research. The terminological background of Honneth’s reflections enables us to highlight the complexity and incongruity of Boas’s attitudes towards Others in his work, ranging from starkly reifying approaches to those of objectification and recognition.

Boas and anti-racism

Boas has often been lauded for his anti-racist stance, a designation he earned for the anthropological understanding of the concept of race he developed and for his activism

with regard to specific cases of racially based discrimination. As a serious intellectual, Boas modified his understanding of race over the course of his (long) scholarly life. Nonetheless, certain fundamental elements underpinned his approach. He adhered to the notion that humanity was a single whole, albeit with a diversity of physical and other expressions characterizing groups of people. As was the case for most (physical) anthropologists in the early 20th century, Boas considered race to be an essential human quality. As Hans Walter Schmuhl (2009, 205, emphasis in the original) has remarked,

*‘Bekanntlich hat Boas die Existenz menschlicher Rassen **nicht grundsätzlich** in Abrede gestellt – nur hatte er in Zweifel gezogen, dass es unveränderliche Rassenmerkmale geben könnte.’²*

Boas aimed to put the study of race on a scientific basis – meaning one that was inductively derived, systematic and critical. Among the main tools for doing so were quantitative methods and metrics – involving in most cases measuring people, both alive and dead, a point to which we will return below (Teslow 2014, 49–52).

This is not the place to discuss each of the many projects Boas undertook and the ways they contributed to his developing conception of race. But it is important to highlight a study that he published in 1912 entitled *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (see Boas 1940, 60–75). In that project, he took measurements on the heads of recent immigrants to the U.S. and their American as well as foreign-born children. He demonstrated – apparently to his own initial surprise – that head form, and especially the so-called cephalic index, varied significantly between American-born children and their foreign-born parents. In a word, heredity did not alone determine head shape; rather, environment played a major role (Teslow 2014, 58–65; Hazard 2020, 19–20).

From this as well as other projects in which he and his students engaged, Boas became increasingly convinced that race could only be understood as a historical phenomenon, as something malleable that was shaped by social, cultural and natural environments. Notably, he did not discard the notion of race, but rather moved increasingly away from biology and heredity as determinants of the variations that were claimed to be defining features of

² [tr. As is well known, Boas did not deny the existence of human races *in principle* – he only doubted whether there could be unchangeable racial characteristics]. Translation: S. Pollock and R. Bernbeck.

racial types. Boas was making these intellectual changes at a time when many people, especially in biological anthropology, were turning to genetics and biological determinism as explanations. With time, Boas was persuaded that race had little or nothing to do with behavior or mental differences; the roots of these differences were rather to be located in sociocultural factors (Stocking 1992, 107; see, for example, *The Aims of Anthropological Research* in Boas 1940, 243–259). The importance of malleability and of sociocultural factors may also have been influenced by his own experience of growing up Jewish in late 19th-century Germany, when the rampant anti-Semitism of earlier times turned into a ‘racial’ anti-Semitism that ended any attempt at Jewish assimilation into German society (Lilienthal 1993).

In addition to his university-based activities, Boas also engaged in forms of activism, especially concerning racial discrimination. Although this became most visible in the years of his employment at Columbia University, the roots can be traced to his own experience of anti-Semitism in Germany, which he fought – literally – in the form of numerous duels (Stocking 1992, 96; Appiah 2020). And Kiel – where Boas received his PhD prior to emigrating to the United States – was one of the places where the persecution of Jews began well before 1933 (Frank 1997, 733).

At an intellectual level, Boas’s activism took the form of engagements with the African-American community in the U.S. From the early years of the 20th century he had connections to the sociologist and civil rights activist, W. E. B. Du Bois (Hazard 2020, 15–16). Du Bois invited Boas to take part in a study of the African-American population, resulting in a further invitation to present his ideas at a 1906 conference at the historically black Atlanta University. His initial talk did not go over well. He argued against notions of African-American inferiority but spoke also about a relation between large skull size and greater intellect, claiming that this relation explained why there were more men of genius among (white) Europeans than among African Americans. After the frosty reception, Boas followed up on the next day by pointing out that people of African descent had a great history of which they should be proud. Citing Vernon Williams, the historian Anthony Hazard (2020, 16) remarks, ‘the “Boasian paradox” was on full display.’ One could also interpret the situation by saying that Boas was reminded of his forgetfulness of recognition, after which he reversed some of his interpretation, although not the gist of the objectivist base of the research.

Despite this, Boas went on to make long-term contribu-

tions to the black rights movement in the U.S. And at least indirectly due to his scholarship, many African Americans came to anthropology in the 1920s, seeing the discipline as a way to document and celebrate African heritage. With the rise of Nazi Germany, Boas found a new cause for his work on racial difference, attacking Nazi racial propaganda and combating what he referred to as the ‘Aryan nonsense’ (Hazard 2020, 16, 21).

This take on Boas can be summarized in the words of Tracy Teslow (2014, 33), who sees Boas’s work as ‘a decades-long struggle to comprehend human variation while contesting and combating prejudice and discrimination.’

Boas, the anthropological collector

There are, however, also other sides of Boas that stand in fundamental contrast to his attitudes just described. In the remainder of this paper, we will focus on Boas as an anthropologist who practised ‘salvage ethnography.’ This commonly held notion that anthropology should engage in ‘salvage’ work was based on the observation that Native American (and, of course, other) groups were being physically decimated and their ‘traditional’ cultures were rapidly disappearing (Redman 2021). It was a spur for Boas and other scholars to collect whatever they could before it was gone for good. For Boas, this included everything from languages and linguistic data to myths, observations on rituals, ethnographic objects, but also physical measurements (anthropometry), human skeletal remains and even living persons who could be considered exemplars of their cultures. He expressed his fundamental interest in this practice by citing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who wrote that ‘every phenomenon, every fact, itself is the really interesting object’ (Boas 1940, 644).

The neutral-sounding term ‘collecting’ obscures practices that are anything but harmless (see Berner et al. 2011; Pollock 2023). These practices were oriented towards the establishment of an archive, imagined as a ‘neutral’ repository of objects and ‘facts,’ constituted with a specific organization in mind at the time of collecting. Anthropological critiques of the resulting archives have revealed their colonialist and long-term de-humanizing influence (Stoler 2002). We focus here on Boas’s collecting of data directly related to the human body, whether in the form of anthropometrics, living persons or skeletal remains.

In some of his earliest work in North America in the 1880s, Boas travelled along the Northwest Coast of what

is today Canada, visiting a number of Native American groups, including the Kwakiutl / Kwakwaka'wakw. By permission of the mayor of Victoria, he took measurements on imprisoned Native Americans and photographed them nude down to the waist. Moreover, he engaged in the collecting of skulls and skeletons in the hopes of being able to sell them – at \$5 for a skull and \$20 for an entire skeleton – as well as to contribute to the amassing of museum collections. He acquired human remains by engaging the services of other collectors but also by exhuming them from cemeteries himself (Thomas 2000, 59).

He realized that digging up Native American graves was problematic. He wrote in his diary in 1888: 'I dreamed of skulls and bones all last night. I dislike very much working with this stuff; i.e., collecting it, not having it' (Rohner/Rohner 1969, 88, as cited in Pöhl 2009, 64). He was informed by one of the private collectors that when their activities came to light, there was a great deal of local unrest on the part of native groups. At one point when Boas himself was digging, he employed a photographer to distract the Native Americans from what he was doing. In an attempt at self-justification, Boas noted: 'It is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave, but what is the use, someone has to do it...' (cited in Thomas 2000, 59). This side note merits closer analysis. What does it mean that 'someone has to do [the stealing]'? Apparently, Boas had not entirely forgotten the recognitional attitude so basic to mutual human understanding. On the other hand, in this case, 'science' required the opposite – reification. This was not an issue of a simple forgetfulness of recognition, but rather its disavowal. Reification is not a uniform process, as Honneth (2005, 71–72) notes. Boas was aware of a contradiction in his own relation to the Other, and he succumbed willingly to the side of reification.

It was not so different when it came to anthropometric studies. Boas noted that his subjects did not enjoy being measured (Teslow 2014, 52). Nonetheless, in an 1892 study of Native American and white 'miscegenation' commissioned by Frederic Putnam of the Peabody Museum, Boas collected measurements on 17,000 Native Americans from around North America (Teslow 2014, 52–55). Similarly, he participated in the not infrequent practice of 'displaying' Native People in an 'ethnological zoo,' as when he arranged for a dozen Kwakiutl / Kwak'wala to live at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, or a few years later when he coordinated the transport of six Inuit from Greenland to New York to live at the American Museum of Natural History. In the latter case, four of the six died of tubercu-

losis within eight months of their arrival in New York. The young son of one of the deceased men was present at the graveside memorial for his father. As it turned out, however, the grave did not contain his father's body; rather, the bones were quickly accessioned into the museum's collection: another case of stealing for a 'scientific' collection. Faced with critique in the press, Boas argued that there were no other natives around to properly bury the body and the Museum was just as much entitled to the remains as anyone else (Thomas 2000, 79–83).

These and other examples make clear that Boas did not stop short of deception, lies or outright grave looting in service of his scientific aims. This was not unique to Boas: see, for example, the manual for collectors published by Felix von Luschan (1906). Even if he claimed to find it distasteful, Boas did not cease such practices, nor did he discourage others from doing so. Considering his particularistic approach, it is perhaps no wonder that one of his foremost aims was to fill museum storerooms and display cases as well as acquire data in the form of measurements and other observations.

Boas between reification and objectification

Returning to the discussion at the beginning of our paper regarding Honneth's triad of recognition, reification and objectification, it is clear that Boas's relationship to Native Americans, and quite likely also to other groups he considered to be of anthropological interest, was not one of recognition. In other words, he did not treat them with the mutual care and respect that comes from seeing the Other as a subject similar and on an equal footing to oneself.

What about reification and/or an objectifying attitude? Can Boas's deeds and attitudes be rescued from an attribution of full-scale, deceptive reification on the grounds that he was pursuing scientific goals that required observation of the Other?

Even if one argues that he acted within the accepted framework of scholarship in his times, it is clear that Boas was aware that some of his practices were viewed with anything from distaste to horror by the groups who were the objects of his work. Although a small number of Native persons became colleagues, working closely with Boas over many years, his relationship to most others was decidedly instrumentalist – they were reified as sources of data that he had to cajole, trick or deceive into giving him

what he wanted. Unlike his relations to African Americans whom he seems to have been more willing to acknowledge as the subjects of discrimination that needed to be ended (see Gupta/Stoolman 2022), Boas apparently viewed Native Americans more as objects of interest, rather than subjects with whom he might engage in dialogue. In this regard, Honneth's notion of a disavowal of recognition as one kind of reification applies to Boas's collecting practices.

In summary, whereas Boas was in many respects on the forefront of anthropological approaches to dismantling elements of racism, he reached what he considered to be the scientific foundation for his ideas through practices that partake of the violence of reification. He championed critical thinking – 'the whole basis of an anthropological viewpoint is the willingness to take the position of the non-conformist, not to take anything in our social structure for granted' (Boas 1945, 179) – but within limits that allowed him a relationship to Others that some consider(-ed) a crime. As is the case for most if not all of us, Boas was blind to how his scholarly ambitions in the name of science led him to justify the epistemic and structural violence that pervaded his interactions with others.

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