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Reflections on Franz Boas' *Anthropology and Modern Life*

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Abstract

This paper critically engages with the book *Anthropology and Modern Life* by Franz Boas, which was originally published in 1928. The paper discusses a number of themes addressed in the book and assesses their relevance to current challenges for anthropological research and public engagement. An important element of Boas' book is his critique of racist thinking as a basis to understand human actions and other aspects of human variability. Even though Boas' treatment of racism is not entirely unproblematic itself, his critical contributions remain deeply relevant today in light of a resurgence of related ideas in current public discourses and anthropological research contexts. Even though Boas' views of education appear to be quite eclectic, they can still serve to support a holistic and reflexive approach towards learning, which are aspects that also come under increasing pressure in higher education contexts in many countries right now. Finally, some consequences of Boas' arguments for current aspects of archaeological issues are discussed, even though archaeology did not feature in *Anthropology and Modern Life* in any substantial form. However, the core themes of Boas' book remain applicable to archaeological research and the impact of archaeological knowledge on public discourses. From this arises a particular responsibility with respect to the historical narratives that archaeology produces and their relationship to contemporary issues and challenges.

Keywords:

Franz Boas, critical research history, racism, anthropology

Introduction

I would like to begin this paper by acknowledging that I wrote it on unceded Noongar Whadjuk Country and that the Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land. In Australia, the custom of acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the Country in which you live and work has become an important part of introducing social gatherings. I open every lecture and tutorial with a short Acknowledgement of Country to make students aware of the fact that they are gathering on unceded and, ultimately, stolen land and that they would not be able to live and learn where they are now if Traditional Custodians had not taken care of the land over many millennia. In my understanding, this acknowledgement is,

therefore, more than a contribution to the preservation of cultural diversity and continuity. It opens the door to the ability to learn from other ways of living to build a more sustainable and equitable future. It is not just a reaction to the ongoing environmental and societal destruction that is experienced by most Indigenous people today. It is also reflective of the position that – in my understanding – should form the non-negotiable foundation of all anthropological inquiry.

However, while most researchers can probably agree with this general statement, it is also clear that the situation is more complicated, within and outside of academia. How is cultural diversity defined? How can it be preserved within modern processes of globalisation, climate change, capitalism, nationalism, and within the bureaucratic

framework of nation-states? Most recently, these questions have gained new levels of significance in the context of the various crises we have experienced and are still experiencing. In no particular order, these are the war in Ukraine, human-induced climate change, the rise of nationalism and national populism, the Covid-19 pandemic and the related conspiracy theories and increased anti-scientific sentiment, along with the persistent issues of structural and systemic racism in many countries, which were and are the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement. In light of these interrelated developments, the current period is often compared to the global situation of the early 20th century and, particularly, the years between the World Wars.

It was an intriguing coincidence that I bought the Routledge Classics Edition of Franz Boas' *Anthropology and Modern Life* in our local bookstore in Fremantle just a couple of days before Nils Müller-Scheeßel first made contact for the Boas Talks conference at Kiel University in November 2021. The conference was held to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the conferral of Franz Boas' doctoral degree in 1881. He graduated from Kiel University in marine physics with a thesis on *Beiträge zur Erkenntnis der Farbe des Wassers*. The conference was a significant occasion to honour one of the most influential figures in the history of anthropology and to celebrate the connection between Franz Boas and his alma mater

in Germany. Franz Boas remains an intellectual giant and is among the very few figures who can without a doubt be described as a founding figure for a whole academic tradition. Because of this enormous heritage, I want to be clear about the fact that I cannot claim to be an expert on Franz Boas' work or his life and achievements. In fact, largely the exact opposite is the case, and I never had much direct exposure to his work as far as I remember from my undergraduate studies in Germany and postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom. I nevertheless always felt a diffuse sympathy for Franz Boas, which must be related to some introductory course in Anthropology and the assertion that he was a cultural relativist and that he propagated a four-field approach towards anthropology. When I started

studying at Tübingen University in the early 1990s, I selected Palaeolithic archaeology, social anthropology, and palaeoanthropology, so that I almost fulfilled Boas' ideas around a four-field anthropological education. Hence, I bought the book because of general curiosity and the acknowledgement that I did not know enough about one of the most influential figures in the history of anthropology. And I was immediately deeply intrigued by it. In this paper, I do not want to attempt to provide a deep and comprehensive engagement with Franz Boas' work. I rather present some brief reflections on *Anthropology and Modern Life* from my own perspective. I will explore the value of the book in relation to some current anthropological challenges today, particularly those that

have specific significance for my own work. These are the topics of racism, the understanding of (higher) education, and the role of contemporary archaeological theory and practice. Perhaps reflecting some residual influence of Boasian thinking on my own interests and views, I will use the term anthropology in a very broad sense to encompass biological as well as cultural or social anthropology.¹

Anthropology and Modern Life was originally published in 1928 (Fig. 1). The end of Franz Boas' long career stood under the immense shadow of the rise of Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism, and other authoritarian regimes. The book is reflective of Franz Boas' vision of the anthropologist as a public advocate for reason, critical inquiry, free

speech, and a protector of the diversity of human lifeways and cultural expressions. His life project was a fundamentally ethical and moral undertaking. When I first opened the book, I realised that Boas engaged much more than I had realised with issues related to biological anthropology. He clearly thought that racial questions needed to be given prominence in his book and were particularly important

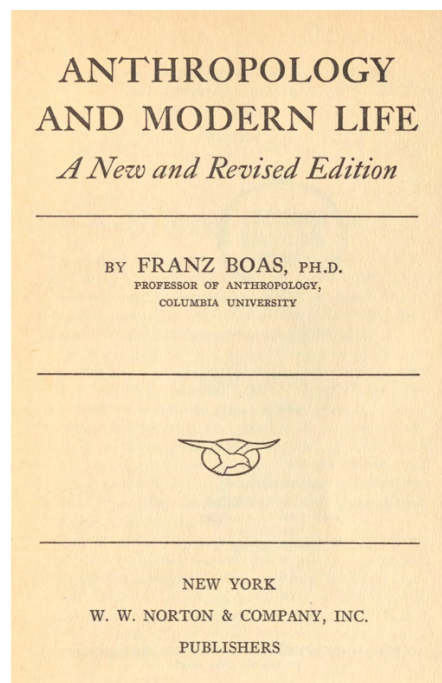


Fig. 1: Frontispiece of the revised edition of Franz Boas' *Anthropology and Modern Life* of 1932.

¹ While I cannot pin down my first substantial engagement with Franz Boas' work and his integrative four-field understanding of anthropology, I always had a deep sympathy for his orientation. I cannot claim to have been greatly and directly influenced by Franz Boas. My own work has rather been shaped by the work of Tim Ingold, who, at least from the early 1990s onwards, has argued for a similarly foundational rejection of the separation of social and biological approaches and a holistic anthropology (Ingold 1991; Ingold 1998; Ingold/Palsson 2013).

to address for the general reader. It is this aspect he is referring to in the very first sentence of the preface of the book:

“In writing the present book I desired to show that some of the most firmly rooted opinions of our times appear from a wider point of view as prejudices, and that a knowledge of anthropology enables us to look with greater freedom at the problems confronting our civilisation” (Boas 2021, XXIII).

Within the structure of the book, Boas devoted chapters 2 (The Problem of Race) and 3 (The Interrelations of Races) to the discussion of issues related to race and racism, and this focus is certainly not surprising in light of the historical and political circumstances he was operating in.

Racism

Obviously, Boas was deeply concerned and distressed by the rise of Nazism in his home country. But as the book was first aimed at a North American audience, it is also a reminder that racial thinking was virtually the default position of global anthropological thought during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in academic circles, particularly in the United States. As such, it informed public and political discourses and decisions, including immigration policies. This is an aspect that remains unfamiliar territory for many people in English-speaking countries and is sometimes conveniently forgotten or belittled (Marks 2012; Fuentes 2015). For Boas, it was normal and necessary to move between social and biological anthropological topics and arguments, because this reflected the structure of the anthropological discourse of his time. He differed, of course, in the assessment of the evidence and the tendency to explain human variation in racial or biological terms. Questioning the latter was one of the central aims of the book and one of the key concerns of his career. Apart from Boas' untiring opposition to racist ideas in anthropological research and the public sphere, he also actively supported African American intellectuals in their civil rights work. He showed a great degree of empathy in this context and provided assistance on numerous academic, financial, and logistical levels (Lewis 2001, 455). Intellectually, it is important to stress that Boas argued against all forms of essentialism and totalising tendencies both in the realms of biology and culture. He continuously stressed the vari-

ability and changeability of phenomena as well as the interdependence of biological, cultural, and linguistic factors (Lewis 2001, 456). When he conducted the seminal study in 1909 on bodily types of European immigrants to the United States, he empirically demonstrated the instability and plasticity of racial types and dealt scientific racism a significant blow (Boas 1911a). He continued to conduct similar studies over the following decades, but notions of variability and malleability remained key aspects of his work on cultural processes as well (Zumwalt 2019). However, as will become clear below, his views were not entirely unproblematic, and he still followed ideas that have themselves been labelled as racist by more recent scholars.

It is usually asserted that race was abolished as the dominant explanatory dimension of human variation after the horrors of WWII and the Nazi Regime. Although this aspect features prominently in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the reality of the rejection of racism was a much more complicated and fraught process. It was fundamentally connected to post-WWII post-colonial political and intellectual developments and the critique of racism is a cornerstone in many foundational texts of the postcolonial movement (Fanon 1967; Bhabha 1994; Appiah 1998). However, political developments in the United States, South Africa, Australia, and many other countries demonstrate that the legacies of racism continue to be significant and influential until today. The murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and many other Black Americans in the United States in 2020 caused widespread demonstrations and protests. With reference to the term *BlackLivesMatter*, similar protests were held in many other countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and France (Szetela 2020). They drew attention to the persistent racial injustices and systemic power imbalances between social groups within and between countries. The Covid-19 pandemic made some of these disparities particularly visible at various scales from single cities to countries in the Global North and Global South (Kelley et al. 2020). It drew further attention to the historical dependencies of current economic patterns of resource exploitation and extraction. More recent postcolonial scholars have stressed the racial dimensions of the current global political and economic system as the continuation of European-dominated colonialism (Andrews 2021).

Boas was very much aware of these structures during his own time and large sections in *Anthropology and Modern Life* demonstrate his insights extensively. His integrative approach towards anthropology was well-suited to an en-

agement with scientific racism and racial determinism as he both analysed biological and cultural variability as well as their problematic proposed correlations. In this, Boas recognised that racism is neither a biological nor a socially constructed phenomenon. It is both and neither. Racism is an intertwined nature/culture phenomenon (Marks 2013). To understand racism, competencies in biological and social/cultural anthropology are equally necessary. It is, therefore, quite problematic that Boas' four-field approach towards anthropological research increasingly fragmented after WWII and biological and social anthropology drifted further and further apart, both institutionally and epistemologically. This was a global development, which – because of Boas' legacy – had the most disruptive effects in North America. It can be argued that these shifts leave many researchers increasingly ill-equipped to recognise and engage with racist legacies in anthropology and in public debates. Racist thinking did not disappear from anthropology post-WWII and it continued to have a significant impact, particularly in the United States. For example, in the widely read book *The Origin of Races*, Coon (1962) not only argued that present-day races originated separately during human evolution. In his function as the president of the *American Association of Physical Anthropologists*, Coon supported the policies of American segregationists and argued that African Americans should not have equal access to civil rights and participation in American society (Jackson 2001). This last example draws attention to the extensive connections between academic and public debates, perceptions, and decision-making processes. Franz Boas was probably the first public intellectual in anthropology to engage with both domains fully and equally. A similar engagement remains important because of the increasingly popular trope of race science today that has been emerging as a highly concerning trend that is also often clearly politically motivated and linked to national populist movements (Marks 2008; Saini 2019).

However, Boas' cautionary comments should also be seen in relation to less obvious elements of racist thinking and this aspect is particularly enhanced through the increasing prominence of molecular genetics across different fields of research, and numerous examples show how easily different aspects of racist thinking can creep into research designs and the interpretation of data (Marks 2020; Raff/Mulligan 2021). Boas did not engage with questions of the deep past or human evolution in *Anthropology and Modern Life*. However, key elements of his work that critiqued racial ideas are still applicable to some

areas of modern human evolutionary research, such as the use of genetic data to reconstruct ethnic identity and genetic ancestry (TallBear 2013). Similarly, problematic elements can also be found in much more directly politicised examples that show how the same issue is weaponised in relation to nationalistic and national populist interests (Blakey 2020). Even the notion of eugenics continues to have an influence on debates on pre-birth tests and DNA optimisations (King 1999; Rutherford 2022) and racial thinking impacts anthropological research under the guise of a misunderstood scientism and biological essentialism (McLemore 2021; Mullings et al. 2021). Most recently, an interdisciplinary group of researchers has warned against simplistic understandings of human ancestry and the use of continental categories (such as European, South Asian, Middle Eastern etc.) (Lewis et al. 2022). They warn against the racial legacy of these categories and how they are in complete disagreement with the empirical reality. In an almost Boasian fashion, they assert the necessity to view human genetics not as a biological phenomenon but a field at the “intersection of several disciplines, including anthropology, demography, epidemiology, history, and sociology” (Anderson 2019; Lewis et al. 2022, 252).

While Franz Boas should be appropriately celebrated for his opposition to racist thinking during his time, it also needs to be emphasised that his views were not entirely consistent. This is not surprising in the light of the expansive and pioneering character of his work. But it is still worth adding a few critical comments at this stage. Ingold (2016, 314) has noted that Boas' himself shifted during his career from racial to cultural determinism. In his early work, he argued that people's modes of thought were a consequence of the material structure of the brain, which was effectively caused by living in a particular environment. Later, this view was supplemented by Boas' acknowledgement that “the mental characteristics of man are the same all over the world” (Boas 1911b, 104). Both elements form aspects of Boas' most prominent book, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (Boas 1911b) and can also be traced in *Anthropology and Modern Life* (Boas 2021, 22–30). As Boas did often assemble his more popular texts from fragments of other publications and he was moving within a complex scientific and political environment, these incoherencies are not entirely unexpected. They are more reflections of the complexities of Boas' subject matter and less of intellectual shortcomings. However, other authors have recently drawn attention to other contradictions within Boas' oeuvre between his anti-racist stance

and his support for assimilation as a supposedly progressive reform agenda. Baker (2020) has demonstrated that Boas supported processes of Black assimilation and amalgamation in the United States in the early 20th century and during discussions about his famous study of bodily types of European immigrants (Boas 1911a). In a letter to a member of the Dillingham Commission on United States immigration questions, Boas argued that the Black population could socially progress only through an influx of “white blood”:

“Broadly speaking, the question before us is that of whether it is better for us to keep an industrially and socially inferior large black population, or whether we should fare better by encouraging the gradual process of lightening up this large body of people by the influx of white blood” (Boas 1909, quoted in Baker 2020, 137).

In *Anthropology and Modern Life*, this topic briefly surfaces in Boas' argument for amalgamation as a significant precondition for a nation's social coherence (Boas 2021, 51). As Baker (2020) convincingly argues, Boas' argument is itself racist in this case, because it imposes a narrow definition of a nation's character and that of its citizens, and both are implicitly and explicitly understood in racial terms. This latter example shows that Boas' understanding of the biological dimension in human variability needs to be carefully assessed. His cultural and biological relativism often exists in an uneasy tension with his ideas about humanity's general advancement and historical progression and which measures should be implemented to achieve both (see also Bennett 2018, 246–288). As outlined above, the last few years have reminded us that these questions and the underlying challenges will remain topics of considerable significance in the future to come.

Anthropology and education

Without doubt, anthropology in the spirit of Franz Boas has an important role to play in current discourses and beyond the disciplinary boundaries that have developed in the field in the last 50 years or so. In this context, it is also appropriate to consider Boas' arguments in relation to the structure of education (see also e.g., Morenón 2017). In *Anthropology and Modern Life*, Boas (2021, 93–111) develops an interesting take on education and how it should be structured in a modern society. He is obviously

concerned about the ways that nationalistic regimes approach education and how they want to form “citizens who are one in thought, one in being, swayed by the same symbols” (Boas 2021, 104). But he is also critical of the intellectual class in modern society, because of their specialised knowledge and outlooks, which are the consequence of an established and inflexible education approach that focusses too much on the replication of conventions and traditions: “It is therefore not surprising that the thought of what we call the educated classes is controlled essentially by those ideals which have been transmitted to us by past generations” (Boas 2021, 109). This understanding clearly reflects his ongoing conflicts with established opinions and his challenges of existing paradigms, both in terms of academic knowledge and political decision-making. But in *Anthropology and Modern Life*, he specifically relates these aspects to differences in educational regimes, both within modern society and between societies. In relation to the former, he analyses the increasing differentiation and specialisation that almost makes communication between different sections of society impossible. He also argues that urban populations are generally more flexible in their responses to challenges and appear to be more morally grounded:

“It is therefore not surprising that the masses of a city population, whose attachment to the past is comparatively slight, respond more quickly and more energetically to the urgent demands of the hour than the educated classes, and that the ethical ideals of the best among them are human ideals, not those of the segregated class” (Boas 2021, 110).

This statement is certainly hardly defensible sociologically and would deserve further scrutiny. However, here, I just want to use it as an example of Boas' aim of relating the attitudes and beliefs of every member of a society to particular educational regimes or practices. One of the objectives of Boas' discussion of education in *Anthropology and Modern Life* is the exploration of the formation of knowledge in different social contexts and societies. It is certainly a part of his advocacy against prejudices in the education system in the United States and any systemic imbalances based on racial factors. But he also invites an engagement with forms of learning in other societies and from an area of study that was not well-developed at that time. He lists a range of examples from small-scale and

weakly differentiated societies that have a less formal education system and appear to support more individuality and independent learning. Such an approach supports Boas' view that education as such must enable an understanding of exactly those processes that influence the formation of knowledge and, hence, provide strategies to enhance educational opportunities. He is advocating for a critical awareness of the importance of learning from past experiences and learning from other societies. In *Anthropology and Modern Life*, he formulates this aim in the following way:

"We are building up our new ideals by utilizing the work of our ancestors, even where we condemn it, and so it will be in the future. [...] When we once recognise this process, we must see that it is our task not only to free ourselves of traditional prejudice, but also to search in the heritage of the past for what is useful and right, and to endeavour to free the mind of future generations so that they may not cling to our mistakes, but may be ready to correct them" (Boas 2021, 111).

This section is in the spirit of a well-known quote by Boas, which was first published in 1938 in an essay titled *An Anthropologist's Credo* (Boas 1938, 201): "How can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them". For me, these statements draw attention to the need to preserve the richness of human variability and possibilities and engage with the Other in a reflective and informed fashion, so that opportunities for mutual learning can be created. We are all entangled in social and historical dependencies, but there are always choices available to make things better for everyone moving forward.

Obviously, such a vision is very much in agreement with a Boasian holistic anthropology, and it is worth reflecting on this briefly here in relation to current developments in the higher education sector. Unfortunately, in many countries, there is currently a trend away from these ideals and aims. In Anglo-American countries, higher education is becoming increasingly the target of right-wing or conservative politicians. Changes that are seemingly aimed at making institutions more sustainable and cost-effective are invariably aimed at the social sciences and the arts (Connell 2022). In Australia, for example, the previous Federal Government pushed through legislation in 2020 that effectively doubled the fees for courses

in these latter fields under a so-called job-ready package that supposedly was aimed at directing students towards those fields in which the government perceived future skills shortages such as engineering, medical sciences etc. (Australian Government/Department of Education, Skills, and Employment 2022). The consequences of these blatant politically partisan decisions for those fields that are not perceived as priority areas of the previous conservative federal government will be felt for many years (Norton 2020).

While the spirit of many academics in the humanities and social sciences is understandably not very high right now, there are also voices that provide hopeful perspectives. Within anthropology itself, one can turn, for example, to Tim Ingold, who has recently provided some considerations that show similarities with a Boasian understanding. Like Boas, Ingold has little respect for those disciplinary boundaries that today regularly separate the different sections of anthropology, particularly between social and biological anthropology (Ingold 1998). But he has recently also explored the notion of education in greater detail, which he understands as an aspect of the continuation of life itself. Education should not be about the management of and the preparation for life. It should rather enable learners to lead their own lives with the help of their teachers (Ingold 2018). Ingold is also very much opposed to the increasing corporatisation of public universities that turns them into reflections of the global knowledge economy in which knowledge is only valuable if it can be objectified, quantified, and commodified. It is clear that in such a system education in the Boasian spirit cannot flourish and these developments need to be opposed to enable universities to continue to be places for learning for responsible and engaged citizens in the spirit of tolerance and social justice.

Archaeology

While Franz Boas is undeniably the father of the four-field approach to anthropology that became the template for anthropological departments in the United States, he had virtually nothing to say about the role of archaeology in relation to the issues addressed in *Anthropology and Modern Life*. Obviously, this is a bit frustrating for me, but the situation could possibly be explained with reference to the still pioneering character of archaeology during the early 20th century and the perceived inability of archaeological research to make any meaningful contribution to

the complex issues discussed by Boas. At the same time, of course, the power of archaeological knowledge was already recognised by the Nazi Regime and the potentials of manipulating the understanding of history for political gains and aspirations (Härke 2002; Arnold 2006; Laurence Hare 2014).

So, can archaeology really contribute to the challenges or questions raised by Boas in *Anthropology and Modern Life*? Can archaeology play a role in shaping the future and tackling current global challenges? Some recent voices (e.g., Smith 2021) suggest that archaeology has not been overly successful in this respect, that the field has been largely ignored in wider debates or that archaeologists have not made meaningful contributions. Smith's proposal for a way forward is an increase in transdisciplinary collaborative research and "the production of quantitative scientific results that will be useful to scientists in disciplines more closely involved in today's global challenges" (Smith 2021, 1061). This suggestion is, of course, very much in contradiction to Boas's vision of a holistic anthropology and it was already outlined above that many current challenges need to be addressed in a multi-disciplinary way and across the science/humanities divide. The proposition, in contrast, implies a very narrow understanding of anthropology and, hence, archaeology, which should be focused on the generation of quantitative data. What seems to be missing here is the element of historical understanding and interpretation and archaeology's powerful potential to uncover and reconstruct human lifeways at spatial and temporal scales that are not accessible to other fields of study. Archaeology not only produces data that can then be used by other academic disciplines, and it should not be reduced in such a way. Archaeology produces historical narratives, and these narratives continue to have an impact on today's understandings of society and future decisions (Porr/Matthews 2016). This is the power of archaeology, and it necessitates a high degree of reflexivity to prevent the construction of versions of the past that mirror and act as justifications for present conditions and configurations. I have recently explored these aspects in relation to the fields of palaeoanthropology and human origins research with several colleagues from a range of disciplinary fields (Porr/Matthews 2017; 2020). This work builds on the ground-breaking contributions of Landau (1991) and Stoczkowski (2002) in an attempt to understand the processes that contribute to the construction of knowledge within these areas. It is certainly significantly removed from Franz Boas' approaches, but

it preserves a healthy multi-disciplinarity, reflexivity, and an awareness of the relevance of academic knowledge for contemporary political issues. In contrast to the slightly reductive views of Smith (2021), there is also a new and powerful movement forming in archaeology that takes the dimension of social justice much more seriously than ever before (Schaepe et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2022). It is no surprise that this latter aspect is only enhanced by the recent crises as outlined above and the destructive racial ideologies that are fuelling many of them (Carruthers et al. 2021; Flewellen et al. 2021). These initiatives remain relevant today as much as they were important during Boas' times.

In Australia, the interpretation of the deep human past also has an enormous impact on questions of Aboriginal political participation and recognition. These engagements are not without friction and as we have argued in a recent discussion piece in *Australian Archaeology*, they need to be self-critical and avoid epistemological naivety, because they can easily erase past variabilities and complexities despite the best intentions (Porr/Vivian-Williams 2021). In the spirit of Franz Boas' above-mentioned quote, archaeology can substantially participate in the broadening of the imagination of possible ways of living and political and economic modes of existence. We have been suggesting this for the engagement with the deep past of Australia, but it is also a goal that should be pursued on a more global scale. The recent book *The Dawn of Everything* by Graeber/Wengrow (2021) is trying to do exactly this in a highly publicised way. The mostly positive reception in the media draws attention to the relevance of archaeological knowledge, an interest among the broader public, and the necessity to make archaeological evidence relevant to current global challenges. Most importantly, this book draws important connections between political decisions about the future and our reading of the (deep) past of humanity. The book explicitly engages with the most widely and publicly accepted understanding of human history as a progression from technologically and socially more simple societies to more complex ones. This understanding has implicit and explicit consequences for the range of social, technological, and economic alternatives we might imagine as acceptable modes of living. The authors – largely convincingly, in my view – draw attention to the extensive global variability among past hunting-gathering societies and those that are traditionally viewed to be at the boundary to agricultural societies. They present a real kaleidoscope of past political and economic systems beyond established categories and a linear progression within human history. In this way and

based on a careful reading of the available evidence, Graeber/Wengrow (2021) develop a much more active, experimental, and open vision of humanity's past and, therefore, of humanity's future.

Conclusion

Despite historical contingencies, key aspects of *Anthropology and Modern Life* remain relevant and almost timeless. Boas' book had a clear educational aim and was written for the broader public. He predicted that it will not be popular because it questioned too many strongly held beliefs and convictions. The book's key themes of race, nationalism, and the impact of cultural dispositions on human actions remain significant aspects of current discourses. Their ongoing relevance in the public sphere shows that an engaged and reflexive anthropology needs to continue to conceptualise and comment on current issues in a Boasian spirit beyond disciplinary boundaries.

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