

FRANZ BOAS AS POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Harvey A. Levenstein
The University of Wisconsin

The question of the relationship between scientific thought and political thought is both a complicated and a touchy one. It becomes especially touchy when one tries to deal with this relationship on the level of the mind of an individual scientist. For when a scientist's political conclusions obviously coincide with his scientific conclusions, one is justified in asking the question: which came first? This applies to the Paulings and Tellers of the world as well as the Lysenkos. It also applies to Franz Boas.

The image of himself that Boas appears to be transmitting to posterity is that of the dispassionate, "objective," scientist, far removed from the problems of the day, sitting quietly in his ivory tower allowing the "facts" to lead him where they may. In part this is of his own doing. In his teachings and writings he repeatedly emphasized this view of the scientist. His concept of the scientist was that of someone engaged in the never-ending quest for "truth." Certainly Boas believed in and tried to follow this ideal. But he also had other, more prosaic ideals which forced him to descend into the arena to do battle with people engaged in much less admirable endeavours. In this paper I shall examine the way in which Boas used some of his scientific beliefs to buttress his "political" beliefs, concentrating upon his ideas on the most pressing questions he had to deal with in his lifetime--those of race and nationalism. But, first I shall examine his views on the question of the relationship between scientific and political beliefs and his general political outlook.

It is obvious that Boas' political and scientific views complemented each other, that each supported the other. If one tries to answer the question of which came first in a strictly chronological sense, finding the answer is easy. Boas himself has described his early intellectual influences: "The background of my early thinking was a German home in which the ideals of the revolution of 1848 were a living force" (1938a:201). The ideals of the abortive 1848 Revolution in Germany were the ideals of nineteenth century European liberalism, of Kant and the Enlightenment. Transported to the United States by Germans like Carl Schurz, they became even more liberal and democratic. Indeed, Schurz, who is one of the classic nineteenth century "laissez-faire" liberals in the United States, was one of Boas' political idols and Boas frequently referred to and identified with him. The emphasis of these ideals was on political and intellectual freedom, on the maximum freedom for the individual from governmental and social restraint. Boas fought consistently throughout his life for these ideals of intellectual freedom; indeed, one of his last public forays was an article condemning the whole concept of the Dies Committee, the first House Un-American Activities Committee, for its intrusion upon the rights of free speech (1940a:156-157). It is from these ideals, and, probably, also from his Jewish background, that Boas derived his emphasis on judging people as individuals, and not as members of social or racial groups, and his animus towards prejudice of any kind. He repeatedly stated that he did not believe that all individuals were endowed with equal talents but that they did have

the right to equal opportunity to develop what talents they had. Thus his firm opposition to racism of every kind.

That these ideals were implanted in Boas before he became interested in anthropology is apparent. Whether they influenced the conclusions he drew from his scientific studies is a moot point, and in the end, probably unanswerable. Yet Boas himself, indicated that possibly his interest in the subject was a very didactic one. In 1938 he wrote that one of the major shocks which shaped his intellectual life was his confrontation with a friend who asserted that we have no right to doubt what the past has transmitted to us.¹ He reacted strongly against this tradition-bound outlook. "In fact," he continued, "my whole outlook upon social life is determined by the question: how can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them" (1938a:202; emphasis supplied). Whether this is an accurate account of the origin of Boas' interest in anthropology or not, and unless the friend was a Baffin Island Eskimo, it would appear to conflict somewhat with the standard account of his switch to anthropology, this statement brings out the underlying assumption behind all of Boas' lay work. In essence it was the confidence of the reformer that if only the people could be made to perceive the truth about certain issues, that once the influence of the irrational was broken through the continual explication of the rational, they would act in a desirable way. It is a reflection of what today seems to be the somewhat naïve optimism which underlay nineteenth century European liberal thought. In the United States this confidence reached its apogee in the Progressive Movement around the turn of the century. Boas was a part of both movements.

As for the question of whether Boas' original choice of anthropology was prompted by the didactic reasons that the above quote would seem to indicate, it would appear that the little story was somewhat aphoristic. If not, then Boas was certainly remiss throughout the nineteenth century in helping the general public to break the chains of tradition that bind them. In his early years at Columbia, Boas was notorious as an anti-popularizer. "To his German-trained mind," said Time, "the idea of popularization was repugnant" (1936:41). Until the turn of the century, Boas appears to have written only monographs. The earliest contributions to lay periodicals which I was able to find were his review of a book by W. Z. Ripley which appeared in Science, September 1, 1899, and "What the Negro has Done in America," in The Ethical Record, March, 1904. The earliest reference to his involvement in anything even vaguely political is in 1902, when, along with the financier Jacob Schiff, he planned a school for the study of the cultures of the Far East to promote international understanding (Benedict 1943:15).²

It would appear that Boas did not really start his descent to the level of popular culture until after the turn of the century. As to the reasons for this shift, they remain obscure. Undoubtedly, the rise of Progressivism and the whole atmosphere around Columbia, where the two leading Progressive intellectuals, John Dewey and Charles A. Beard, were teaching and fighting with the conservative President, Nicholas Murray Butler and other members of the faculty, stimulated Boas to participate, however meagerly, in the intellectual revolt taking place around him. It is hard to conceive of a Columbia faculty member at that time not taking sides in the growing split and Boas' natural propensities would lead him to side with the reformers. Another stimulus may have been what he later described as "the rude awakening" he experienced when confronted with the sight of American imperialism in 1898 (1916).

Whatever his reasons, Boas became a more frequent and more famous contributor to the important debates of the time as the century drew on. At first he dwelt primarily upon the immigrant and Negro problems, but with the advent of the First World War in Europe he became involved in the question of nationalism. In the twenties his emphasis shifted back to the problems of racism and in the thirties, with the rise of fascism, he dealt with both nationalism and racism together. In this changing emphasis Boas was moving with his times and continually confronting what seemed to him to be the major problems of the day.

Although Boas himself was active in popularizing his anthropological ideas and in using them to buttress his case in the more mundane conflicts of the outside world, this attitude towards science and politics was not necessarily inherent in his approach to anthropology. Indeed, as Paul Radin pointed out in an article in the New Republic in 1939, Boas' major contribution to anthropology in the United States, his emphasis upon a scientific, objective approach to culture, was a double-edged sword. For although it was a great liberating factor for his students, and it did help to break down myths of racial superiority, this view of the social scientist along with Boas' stress on the deterministic aspects of culture and environment could be used to buttress quietism in politics, traditionalism in society, and the justification of the status quo. (Radin 1939). Of course Radin didn't accuse Boas himself of this; he praised him for being in the forefront of the fight against fascism.

Radin's point is a valid comment on Boas' approach but it is not a valid criticism. Certainly, Boas' approach can be used to justify quietism and the status quo. But the example of the many students of his who swerved to the Left during the thirties and, of course, Boas himself, can also be used to show that it does not necessarily have to be so. Like any other intellectual approach which emphasizes the power of forces outside the control of individual human beings, from medieval Catholicism to Hegel's dialectical idealism to Marx's economic determinism, Boas' environmentalism can be used to justify submission to established order. Similarly, his emphasis upon the purity of science and the search for truth can be used to justify quietism. But like the other systems it can also be used to justify change and activism. The conservative aspect of Boas is inherent in his merely stating that there are forces outside of individual human nature which shape it. Although Radin was obviously thinking of the crusading nature of Marxism in the 1930's when he wrote this, the history of Marxism, and especially of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, shows that it too can be used to justify submission to the established order. As for Boas' own stand on this question, a year earlier, he had justified his political action in a consistently environmentalist, if somewhat sophistic way: "My ideals have developed because I am what I am and have lived where I have lived; and it is my purpose to work for these ideals, because the conditions of my culture that run counter to my ideals stimulate me to action" (1938a:204).

The first issue to stimulate Boas to action was the race issue. It was his views on this problem that first brought Boas to national attention.

In order to understand the impact of Boas' views on race, one must continually bear in mind the context in which he was stating them. The idea of equality of the races, in the sense that all races are endowed with an

equal distribution of talents, had never been held by more than a small minority of Americans. Not even the Abolitionists believed that the Negro was really equal in endowments to the white. The period after the Compromise of 1876 had seen a growing reconciliation of North and South in this country and a growing tendency in the North to either ignore the Negro problem completely or to accept the southern view of the Negro.³ By the turn of the century, the dominant view of the Negro, as expounded by the northern media of both popular and haut culture, was that of the docile, innately inferior Sambo. This view was not current just among conservatives; most of the Progressives subscribed to it too. Woodrow Wilson, a Virginian with Virginia's conceptions of race, was able to oversee the impositions of segregation in federal offices in Washington and the demotion of hundreds of Negro civil servants throughout the South with nary a protest from his progressive supporters. At the same time, there was a growing restiveness among at least the more educated Negroes over the reimposition throughout the South of their pre-Civil War status in a different guise.⁴ Thus, when he first started agitating over the race issue, Boas' views coincided with those of only a small minority of the white population.

Boas' first forays into the public debate on race were thus oriented towards the problem of the American Negro. By 1906 his views on the subject were well known enough for him to be asked to give the Commencement Address at Atlanta University. There he gave a glorious picture of the Negro's African past, said it showed what the Negro was capable of when given a chance, and urged the assembled students to go out into the world and fight for their rights (1945:61-69).

Simultaneously, Boas was getting involved in another problem that became the subject of bitter dispute as time wore on. This was the question of immigration to the United States. In 1909 he submitted his famous report to the Immigration Commission which showed that the move to America tended to change certain physical characteristics in the children of immigrants and modify them in a way suggestive of tending towards a common American norm (1940b:60-81). Thus he answered the contention of the opponents of Southern and Eastern European immigration that continued immigration would lead to "mongrelization" with the contention that rather than affect the physical characteristics of native Americans, it would tend to affect the characteristics of the immigrants, who would tend to become physically more like native Americans. He also provided what seemed to be striking proof of the great effect of environment upon human beings and the instability of racial characteristics. It was on these two themes that Boas constantly hammered away in his arguments against racism and immigration restriction.

In the 1920's, the conflict over restrictive immigration legislation came to the fore and Boas joined the losing battle against it. The restrictive legislation, which was aimed primarily at eliminating Southern and Eastern European immigration, found many people who were willing to defend it on the grounds of the necessity for keeping the "Nordic race" pure. At the time it seemed as if the whole western world was about to be carried away by a tide of racism and feelings of racial superiority. Melville Herskovits, a student of Boas', described the situation as it appeared to him in an article of his own in the Nation:

That the psychology of superiority--and particularly of the superiority of the white race and that part of it that comes from Northern Europe--is rampant in the country today is obvious to the most casual observer.

The books and articles from the pens of prolific writers such as Professor MacDougall, Dr. C. C. Josey, Mr. Madison Grant, Mr. Ernest Cox, and Lathrop Stoddard, and the works of Dr. Brigham and other psychologists plus deductions drawn from the psychological tests given in the army during the war, all lend sanction to official actions such as the recent immigration legislation which changed quotas so as to favor North European stock. In addition to this, other laws are advocated enforcing the study of English, or making the requirements for citizenship more and more difficult, and we have the folklore current about the lack of ability and low intelligence of the large Negro section of the population. This phenomenon is a growing thing; we find the identical works that are produced here published in England and seriously discussed; a controversy about the value of race raging in Germany, and a large institute for the study of race-biology in Sweden maintained by the state under a director who believes that the salvation of his country lies in the maintenance of racial purity (Herskovits 1925).

It is interesting to note that even so august a newspaper as the New York Times refused to accept Boas' conclusions. In an editorial in 1927 it cited Brigham's study of the results of army intelligence tests which seemed to prove that Italian immigrants were mentally inferior to native Americans. It also cited Boas' criticism of it, which was based upon a criticism of the utility of American Army intelligence tests as a measure of the intelligence of Italians brought up in a different environment. It also cited another professor at Columbia, M. R. Niefeld, who argued that if valid, all that these tests would seem to prove would be that the less intelligent Italians migrated to the United States. The Times evaded Boas' contentions completely and sourly concluded: "For us it is presumably enough that certain countries send us 'high grade' and other countries 'low grade' intelligence" (January 27, 1927).

In his lay works on race, Boas continually restated the conclusions he had come to in The Mind of Primitive Man: that no physical characteristics exist which doom any particular race to mental and social inferiority and that judged on their own basis, the people who we label "primitive" are no less intelligent than we are; they merely cope with the world in a different, and often more complex way (1938b). Thus he explained what appeared to be the inferior capabilities of minority groups on a historical and environmental basis. At the end of the 1938 edition of The Mind of Primitive Man he wrote:

The traits of the American Negro are adequately explained on the basis of history and social status. The tearing-away from the African soil and the consequent complete loss of the old standards of life, which were replaced by the dependency of slavery and by all it entailed, followed economic struggle against heavy odds, are sufficient to explain the inferiority of the status of the race, without falling back upon the theory of hereditary inferiority (1938b:270).

Of course Boas couldn't deny that individuals possessed varying mental traits. What he did deny was that these traits were determined by race. In 1925 he summed up his position in another article in the Nation:

The occurrence of hereditary mental traits that belong to a particular class has never been proved. The available evidence makes it much more likely that the same mental traits appear in varying distribution among the principle racial groups. The behaviour of an individual is therefore not determined by his racial affiliation, but by the

character of his ancestry and his cultural environment. We may judge of the mental characteristics of families and individuals, but not of races (1925).

Boas felt that race prejudice stemmed from the human mind's tendency to group people together in classes of outsiders. By ascribing its origins to this deep-rooted mental quality, Boas was forced to take a very pessimistic view of the chances of eradicating it and was never able to come up with any solution to the problem other than intermarriage and the eradication of physical differences among men. After the First World War, and possibly as a partial result of his experiences during the war, he appears to have been quite pessimistic about how much education and reason could do to change mass prejudice. He wrote: "We may, perhaps, expect that an increasing number of strong minds will free themselves from race prejudice and see in every person a man entitled to be judged on his merits. The weak-minded will not follow their example" (1921).

By 1931, however, possibly under the influence of the rise in economic class consciousness brought on by the Depression and the example which left-wing groups seemed to be creating, of uniting the discontented lower classes along interracial lines, Boas hinted at a closer possible solution than intermarriage. "We may be reasonably certain," he said, "that whenever members of different races form a single social group with strong bonds, racial prejudice and racial antagonisms will come to lose their importance. They may even disappear entirely. As long as we insist on stratification of racial layers, we shall pay the penalty in the form of interracial struggle" (1931:16-17).

In spite of the pessimism about the possibility of eliminating racial prejudice through reason and education which he expressed in 1921, Boas was too much of a liberal to carry this pessimism over into the realm of personal action, or rather inaction. Throughout the 1920's and 1930's he continued to publish and speak on the topic of race prejudice, predicating his action on the belief that rational explication could change men's minds.

Boas was forced to confront the question of nationalism by the outbreak of World War I. He appears to have been torn between his loyalty to the land of his birth and the rabidly nationalistic aims which many of its supporters professed. A month after the outbreak of the war in Europe he wrote that nationalism was an emotional, narrow concept, doomed to give way to that of the "federation of nations . . . the next necessary step in the evolution of mankind" (1914). Yet, if he thought it somewhat outmoded and narrow, Boas was still willing to accept it and live with it. In 1915, in a tract written for a pro-German group in this country, he differentiated between German and Russian nationalism and the claims of each to unite all of their respective language groups under one flag, asserting that this was not really a very important consideration in Germany, and not very disruptive of the status quo, whereas Russian pan-Slavism was a dangerous, aggressive idea. He pleaded for understanding of the emotional force of these issues, concluding: "We shall not learn the lesson of this war if we condemn Austria and Germany, and praise ourselves on account of our higher humanity. We should remember that we ourselves have acted in just the same way under similar type of provocation" (1915:15).

Up until the very eve of U.S. entrance into the war, Boas continued to defend the German position publicly and presumably Wilson's Declaration of War did not change his mind. After the Armistice, when a measure of free speech was restored, Boas again began to voice his opinions on international affairs. This time a subtle shift in his views is perceptible. His opposition to nationalism now became more strident and to him, the federation of nations became more than just a hope for the future, it became a necessity for the present. In a letter to the New York Post three days before the actual signing of the Armistice, Boas urged the formation of a real league of nations. The principles upon which it was to be based were similar to those of Wilson's Fourteen Points, but Boas' league would have been one which would act on these principles. He perceived the inherent weakness in the League of Nations before it was even formed: "A purely legal agreement guaranteeing to each what he has, will not meet the problem, because it will not overcome the causes that lead to strife. It may easily become a covenant for the perpetuation of injustice." Boas went on to say that in order to be able to function in a way that would enable it to adjust the world order to a changing world, the league would have to demand of its members the abandonment of all ideas of national prestige and sovereignty. In other words, the preservation of world peace was dependent upon the abandonment of the idea of nationalism. It would naturally also involve the abandonment of all forms of imperialism (1915).⁵

It soon became clear that the Versailles League was not going to bear much resemblance to Boas' ideal and Boas was one of the first to protest. It is interesting to note that the parts of the Versailles Settlement on which he concentrated his attack were not the harsh terms imposed upon Germany, although he could not have agreed with them, but the way in which the German Empire was disposed of. He saw through the façade of the mandate system: "Mandatories have an ugly habit of forgetting their mandates and considering their temporary charges as permanent property. . . . The result is very apt to turn out as though 'annexation' had been meant" (1919). Boas painted a dark picture of the results of colonialism--exploitation, cultural disintegration, starvation, disease--and had a distinctly economic interpretation of its causes: "The essential motive for interference in the affairs of foreign countries is the need in our life for the products of these countries. When these cannot be obtained except by native labor, the native is forced to produce what we want and is exploited for our purposes" (1919). He supported the "most radical application of" the program of the British Labor Party, which involved decolonization, international protection of all the former colonies against exploitation and government in the interests of the natives (1919).

The First World War appears to have shaken Boas' faith in the efficacy of reason. As was pointed out above, immediately after the war he became very pessimistic about how much could be accomplished by words alone in the fight against racial prejudice. This pessimism must have been connected with the profound disillusionment with intellectuals in general which Boas appears to have experienced as a result of their performance during the war. World War I witnessed a mass betrayal of ideals on the part of most Western intellectuals. The same thing happened to the international community of intellectuals, which Boas felt himself to be a part of, as happened to the Socialist International--the members split along national lines and scrambled all over each other to support and justify the war effort of their own nations. This was especially true of American intellectuals, and of the

progressives most especially. Boas, in opposing America's participation in the war was part of a lonely, oppressed minority. Thus, in reacting against nationalism and the war it caused, Boas also condemned the intellectuals who he felt created and supported it: "Ideals of this kind can arise in the educated class only and we see, therefore, that national feeling is always based on the efforts of the educated to impress nationalistic ideas upon the mass of the people" (1919). The converse side of this disillusionment with the "educated classes" was a glorification of the untutored masses, whom he saw as repositories of the "general human interests which are always, even in simple tribal life, present among the mass of the people" (1919).

But the disillusionment could not last long. For an acceptance of the futility of education would also have involved an acceptance of the futility of his work and a withdrawal back into the kind of quietism that Boas obviously was not prepared to indulge in. The nationalism issue dropped out of the spotlight during the 1920's, superseded by the race issue. In the 1930's, however, with the rise of Nazism in Germany, the two became fused, and Boas, in attacking the Nazis, found himself attacking both racism and nationalism. He attacked the myth of Aryan and German superiority in the 1930's from the same basis that he had attacked the claims of Anglo-Saxon superiority in the 1920's--the conclusions which he drew from his academic work. It is interesting to note that three months after Hitler came to power, Boas' works were proscribed and publicly burned in Germany (New York Times, May 6, 1933).

Boas' view of nationalism was basically altered by the rise of Hitler; he had never supported it, but his opposition to it became more strident. Before World War I he had seen it as something that could be lived with, and after the war as the great obstacle to world peace; in 1939, however, he viewed it as an unmitigated evil. He agreed with the idea of preserving the cultural diversity of national groups but insisted that this has nothing to do with modern nationalism, "which is based on the assumption, often too true, that every nation is the enemy of all others, and is duty bound to protect its members and itself. Thus nationalism becomes concentrated on the idea of developing power, and its cultural mission is lost sight of" (1938a).

As for the solution of this and the other problems of the world, Boas in the end returned to his old faith in education. Shortly before his death, in an international broadcast to the scientists of the world after the outbreak of World War II, he reaffirmed the necessity for promoting rationality among the masses and stated explicitly the duty of the scientist to come down from his ivory tower and participate in this process. The scientist must continue the pursuit of truth for its own sake, he said, but a new duty also arises. "We no longer can keep the search for truth the privilege of the scientist. We must see to it that the hard task of subordinating traditional lore to clear thinking be shared with us by larger and larger masses of people. We must do our share in trying to spread the art, and to engender the habit of clear thinking" (1945:2).

This solution, of course, is implicit in Boas' analysis of the causes of prejudice and nationalism. In this analysis he stressed the irrational nature and origin of race prejudice and nationalism. In both cases he also emphasized the force of tradition in perpetuating and reinforcing them.

Thus, if the causes of the problem lie in the realm of the mind, the solution must lie there too. But the solution is both too easy and too difficult. It is too easy to arrive at and too difficult to effect. In essence, it not only represents a utopian hope, it also ignores other, more realistic solutions.

The difficulty appears to lie in Boas' analysis itself. He saw both racial prejudice and nationalism as ultimately originating in the primitive instinct to regard all strangers as hostile. This progressed through different stages, taking the form of privileged classes buttressing their privileged position by regarding the lower classes as inferior races, and extending itself to the idea of nationhood. Although this seems to be an historical explanation, it is obviously quite ahistorical. Nowhere does Boas try to document this transition. Although it does provide some insight into the type of psychological need that race prejudice and nationalism satisfy, Boas' analysis fails because it is not historical enough. It does not take into account the changing circumstances that have caused race prejudice to wax and wane during the centuries, to affect some societies very deeply and others hardly at all, and it fails to place modern nationalism in its proper context. It ignores completely what is probably the basic factor beneath the rise of nationalism, that is, the rise of national economies. Thus, Boas' plea for world federation and the abandonment of the concept of national sovereignty were impractical pipe dreams because they were not linked to any scheme which would have facilitated the creation of an international economy. Boas occasionally indicated that he believed in free trade, but he never saw that, even if this became a reality, it would relegate the underdeveloped world to a position of permanent underdevelopment.⁶ Similarly, by emphasizing the irrational basis of race prejudice, Boas virtually ignored the very real economic bases of that too. Thus, he failed to come up with any program that would raise the economic status of the American Negro, and, if not eliminate prejudice completely, at least lessen racial tension.

Thus, Boas' contribution was essentially a negative one; he helped in the attack against racial prejudice and virulent nationalism on the intellectual level. But racist views did not fall into disrepute because Boas, Herskovits, and others proved them to be fallacious. They ceased to be widely proclaimed when immigration restriction became a dead issue and when theories of racial superiority became so identified with the enemies of the United States that to justify them publicly became "Un-American." It was then that Boas' views on race became part of the conventional wisdom. One wonders how current they would be had Hitler preached the unity of all mankind.

ENDNOTES

1. Boas' description of this as a "shock" is probably the use of a bit of poetic license. This was a very common idea among German conservatives of the time, especially those still under the sway of the Right Hegelians.
2. That Schiff had extensive financial interests in the Orient and that his interest in having people study it to promote "goodwill" among the Chinese might be anything more than anthropological apparently did not occur to Boas. Still, whatever Schiff's motives were, Boas' consistent

stand against imperialism of any kind would indicate that if he had suspected something he would not have had anything to do with the plan. However, the plan never got off the ground, and the only information I have been able to find on it is Benedict's cryptic reference to it, so perhaps Boas did smell a rat.

3. See Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion 1865-1900* (New York, Vintage Books, 1959) for an account of this change in Northern opinion.
4. It should be remembered that the institutionalization of segregation did not occur until the 1890's and early 1900's. It was still a relatively new phenomenon then. See C. Van Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1957).
5. He said: "It is clear that this step forward cannot be made by a nation that claims for itself the right to control the foreign policies of other states, as we do with the Spanish-American republics. . . . A league of imperialistic powers will never lead to a lasting peace" (1915:15).
6. He justified his opposition to tariffs on anthropological grounds. See 1945:181).

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