9-2-2011

Franz Boas: Geographer/Anthropologist

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The separation between anthropology and geography is a factor of time, and the divergent meanderings of disciplinary histories. As Larry Grossman once argued, "Cultural geographers and anthropologists are like brothers separated in infancy and taught to speak different languages" (1977:126). In many ways, this is quite true. Anthropology and geography actually do share many roots and intellectual origins, even if these connections aren't exactly emphasized in the respective disciplinary histories. Interestingly, if there is one crucial common ancestor that American geographers and anthropologists share, it is none other than one of the icons of North American anthropology: Franz Boas.

That's because Boas was, in fact, a trained geographer (see Stocking 1974; Boas 1887; Trindell 1959; Koelsch 2004). Sometimes this background doesn't get as much attention as it should in the anthropological origin story here in the US, for some reason or another (see Koelsch 2004 for details about this). As Koelsch argues, "Biographical statements from Boas's students, and others drawing on them, typically treat the geographical episode, if at all, as an ailment of Boas's scholarly adolescence, a kind of intellectual acne to be overcome on his way to maturity" (2004:2). But make no mistake: Boas was indeed a geographer, and the study of that discipline was not just some passing interest. He was thoroughly immersed in the methods, theories, and practices of German human geography. Anthropology in the United States, especially cultural anthropology, was reshaped around the turn of the 20th century, in essence, by a geographer. For anyone who has an interest in understanding the shape of anthropology in the US today, this seems like a fairly important point. Yet, rather than focus on this common history, many anthropologists choose to highlight Boas's passage from geography into anthropology.

The basic mythical story of the Boas "conversion" to anthropology goes something like this: Before around 1883, Boas was a geographer who had some inclinations toward geographical determinism. Then, during 1883-1884, he went to Baffin Land, as a geographer, "listened to some Eskimo folk tales, ate raw seal liver, and returned a convert to anthropology" (Koelsch 2004:2). Just like that, he saw the intellectual light (or something like that) and found his way to anthropology. The only problem with all this? This whole conversion story is probably a bunch of nonsense (despite what A.L. Kroeber, Bunzel, and others may have written).

Why? Because Boas was clearly vested in his identity as a geographer well after the Baffin Land expedition. He did publish his article "The Study of Geography" in 1887--three years after the supposed conversion--after all. But that's only the beginning. As Koelsch explains:

> The Baffin Land experience did not transform Boas from a geographer into an anthropologist. There was no Pauline "conversion" experience on that ice-bound Damascus Road. He published his earliest Baffin Land research in geographical journals.

[1] This essay was originally published in the September 2011 issue of *anthropologies*. Link:
< http://www.anthropologiesproject.org/2011/09/franz-boas-geographeranthropologist.html >

> Their ethnographic approach, his cartographic work, and indeed his central theme of explaining migration patterns and routes...are consistent with the conceptions of geography held by Ritter, Humboldt, and Ratzel (Koelsch 2004:7).

During these years, Boas was trying to find a permanent position as a geographer--first in Germany, and, when that did not pan out, the United States. And his aspirations were ambitious, if nothing else. As early as 1885, Boas had plans to become a central figure in American geography. He obtained a salaried position as the Geography Editor of Science magazine in 1887, and saw this position as a chance to not only promulgate the discipline of geography, but also to embed himself as "the pivot for all geography and related endeavors" (these are his words) in the US (Koelsch 2004:12). These are not the words of someone who has left geography behind.

In 1889 Boas was given a position at Clark University. The ironic part of this is that his appointment letter, written by G. Stanley Hall, was so vague that Boas was unsure at first if he was hired as a geographer or an anthropologist (Koelsch 2004:16). After a few exchanges, Hall finally made it clear that he was interested mostly in Boas's recent, more anthropological work. Boas's official position was as a "docent in anthropology," although it seems pretty clear that he would have been equally content with a position in geography (Koelsch 2004:17; Trindell 1969:333).

If there is a time when Boas became an anthropologist, it was during his three years at Clark University. But it might be more accurate to say that he changed anthropology rather than the other way around. As Darnell puts it, "At Clark, Boas redefined the scope of anthropology to correspond to his own interests" (1998:108). Anthropology, as it was then practiced in Germany, was very different from what Boas envisioned. His version of anthropology had decidedly geographic roots, and this is readily apparent in his focus on concepts such as culture areas and trait diffusion (Koelsch 2004:18). Interestingly, Boas included his essay "The Study of Geography" as one of his key works toward the end of his life (Boas 1940). Clearly, his training and experience in geography had a profound impact on his thinking--and that of generations of US cultural anthropologists who followed in his footsteps.

While the Baffin Land "conversion" may not have magically transformed Boas from a geographer into an anthropologist, it was still an important and decisive experience in his life. Those field experiences, based upon empirical research, convinced him that the environmentally deterministic theories that held sway in geography were untenable. This was when Boas started his shift toward exploring the importance of "culture and cognition" in shaping human-environment relationships (Koelsch 2004:7). This was long before his switch to anthropology, and what it means is that before he worked to reshape the discipline of anthropology, he was already pushing to rethink the dominant precepts of geography...and he was completely out of step with mainstream geographic thought of his time.

Turn of the century geography was dominated by the deterministic approaches of William Morris Davis, Ellen Churchill Semple, and Ellsworth Huntington (Robbins 2004; Koelsch 2004; Trindell 1969). Boas went into the field in Baffin Land seeking to explore "the reaction of the human mind to the environment" (in Trindell 1969:328), which was a thoroughly deterministic

starting point. But his fieldwork led his understandings of human-environment relationships in a completely different direction (Boas realized that his assumptions about the effects of the environment on human behavior were completely wrong). His work shifted from the determinism of his day (i.e. the environment shapes human behavior) toward a deeper interest in the ways in which individual perception--and culture--mediate the relationship between humans and the environment.

In 1969, Roger T. Trindell wrote an article in The Professional Geographer called "Franz Boas and American Geography." In this article, he argues that Boas's geographic thought was all but unknown among most geographers around the turn of the 20th century. His 1887 article on geography, published in Science, went relatively unnoticed. W.M. Davis had, in fact, also published in Science at the same time, but Boas's work apparently made little impact. American geography of the time was decidedly physiographic in nature (Trindell 1969:300), and Boas's work was either ignored, dismissed, or treated as a strange anomaly. It's difficult to say, but what is more than apparent is the fact that Boas's work did not make the impact he must have hoped for. Trindell, however, concludes his article with this provocative paragraph:

> There's no doubt that Boas would have accepted an academic position in geography in 1888 had it been offered. In his initial correspondence, it appears that Boas was primarily interested in introducing geography to the curriculum of Clark University and to that end sent a copy of his article, "The Study of Geography," to G. Stanley Hall, President of the University. Hall made an offer, but it was, as we have noted earlier, to organize a program in anthropology, not geography. If it had been otherwise, how different might the development of American academic geography have been?

This is a pretty fascinating question. In fact, a certain form of Boasian thought *did* reenter American geography in the late 1920s at the University of California, Berkeley, in the form of Carl O. Sauer. This was in part due to the rich collaboration that existed between Sauer and two of Boas's former students: A.L. Kroeber and Robert Lowie (Kenzer 2003). These collaborative efforts led to combined anthropology/geography seminars, field studies, and even, according to some, talk of a joint department (Kerns 2003).

The effects of this synergy between anthropology and geography at Berkeley in the 1920s-1930s had some lasting effects, not only because of interdisciplinary research, but also because of the legacies of the students who passed through the program. As Kerns explains, "for years some graduate students from anthropology considered geography a second home, and those from geography routinely took courses with Kroeber and Lowie" (2003:89). According to Trindell, "the second generation of American cultural geographers was trained in the schools of Sauer and Kroeber at Berkeley" (1969:331). Julian Steward, one of Kroeber's most esteemed students, also minored in geography and took courses with Carl Sauer (Kerns 2003:88-89). Steward's interest in human-environment relationships--through his cultural ecological approach--is one of the well known antecedents to what is called "political ecology" today. The influence of certain genealogies can be traced through the generations: Eric Wolf was one of Steward's students, and his own political economic work has had tremendous impact upon generations of anthropologists *and* geographers of today (including many political ecologists). The Boas-Kroeber/Sauer-

Steward-Wolf genealogy is just one example of many that illustrates these intertwined histories of geography and anthropology.

If anthropology and geography are like two disciplinary siblings who were separated at birth and taught to speak completely different languages, then closer attention to their shared, often parallel histories is imperative for any attempt at mutual conversation. In any quest for understanding, it makes sense to start with some common ground, and to seek out those who have already crossed through similar borderlands and territories. Franz Boas--whose legacy cuts deep into the intellectual landscape of both disciplines--happens to provide a perfect starting point for this interdisciplinary exploration.

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