

Franz Boas is commonly called the "Father of American Anthropology". He's probably best known for his concept of cultural relativism, the notion that cultures must be examined based on their own context and merits, not judged by the customs and codes of other cultures. In his 1894 speech, "Human Faculty as Determined by Race", Boas espoused the foundational ideas that would lead to the modern view of race as a cultural construction. He argued against racial ranking and also that racial differences were small and historically contingent. This was the first crack in the essentialist concept of race: that race was a natural or biological phenomenon. Boas would go on to combat racism throughout his life.

Intro:

Today we're speaking with Herb Lewis, professor emeritus in the department of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin. Herb is a cultural anthropologist, and among his many accomplishments is a long term interest in the history of anthropology, especially the work of Franz Boas. We have asked Herb to talk with us today about Boas and his work against racism.

We posed three general questions to Herb and the outline of his answers to these is also given below:

1. *We have brought Boas up several times in our episodes, but perhaps we could start with you giving us an idea about his early background that led him to his position on race and racism.*
  - a. Herb:
    - i. Family background – Jewish “liberated” and liberal – family still inspired by “the ideals of the revolution of 1848”
    - ii. A liberal moment in German academia: Virchow, Waitz, esp.
    - iii. Experience of fieldwork in Baffinland (Nunavut)--
    - iv. Comments in letter-diary about “looking down on these people”
    - v. “On Alternating Sounds” (1889)
    - vi. “The Half-Blood Indian” (1894)
    - vii. The first explicit statement on “human faculty as determined by race” was in a lecture in 1894 but there were earlier expressions, hints, about FB’s feelings/findings about “primitive peoples.”
    - viii. 1894 talk contained two sections that were incorporated into his 1911 book – his master statement—*The Mind of Primitive Man*.
2. *Could you describe some of Boas’s involvement with W.E.B. DuBois?*
  - a. The Atlanta University Speech – 1906—and its impact on DuBois and others
3. *What do you think our listeners should know about Boas’s fight against eugenics and immigration restriction?*
  - a. The pervasiveness of Jim Crow and aggressive Southern propaganda + growth of “nativism” and anti-immigrant propaganda and feelings. (“Pull up the ladder, Mack. I’m aboard!”)
  - b. Madison Grant above all-- anti-immigrant feeling extended to others than Asians (already excluded)—to –YIKES!!—even Europeans from the wrong parts (i.e. Italians, Poles, Eastern and Southern—and the Jews.)
  - c. Don’t permit weakening of the breed through intermarriage—and we have a new “scientific” understanding of genetics—eugenics—let only the “good folks” breed.
    - i. Boas fought both of these ideas in many ways—constantly—
  - d. Study commissioned by the US Immigration Commission (not knowing what they were getting—and would ignore) – massive study of immigrants and their descendants indicating impact of environment on bodily form (implying intellectual development as well).

- e. Head shape important—not a good marker of race. Major implications for historical study—already argued by Virchow.
- f. Generally continuing—lifelong—battle against all forms of “racial determinism,” hereditarian myths, --eugenics.

Some sources:

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