



Franz Boas, the Arts, Education, and Science

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Abstract

Franz Boas was not only a pioneering anthropologist, becoming known as the “Father of American Anthropology,” but was also a concerned citizen, seeking to use his knowledge and his prominence to improve the society in which he lived. He was deeply concerned with education and thought about ways to improve it. He believed that a well-rounded education included the arts and the sciences, which is why he proposed a plan for New York City’s arts and science establishments, seeking to make them more available to students in the school system.

Introduction

Franz Boas was first a physicist. Although he originally intended to go to Bonn to study with the great Helmholtz, his sister Antonia (Toni), with whom he was very close, became sick, probably with an auto-immune disease, and their parents urged her brother to study in a place close to her so he could visit. Therefore, he chose to study at Kiel, which had only one physicist who was not highly regarded by the mainstream German physics community. This group consisted of well-known men - and this was a man’s world - who wielded some power in the international world of physics. They might well have helped him launch a significant career in physics.

Discussion

We have no way of knowing what would have been Boas’ fate had he studied with Helmholtz, et al. Given the tenacity with which he pursued the career he did have, he might have become a significant physicist.

However, physics at Kiel was limited, and Boas ended up with a project for his doctorate thesis, a treatise on the perception of the color of water, well outside the mainstream interests of the German physics community. Douglas Cole, an early biographer of Boas, sent the thesis to a physicist friend for evaluation. Adequate, but no great shakes, was Rieckhoff’s response [1].

Although this set of circumstances prevented him from pursuing physics as a career, the work on the thesis led to a fascinating insight. In the late nineteenth century, the equipment available to a physicist, particularly at a second-tier school like Kiel, was limited. There were no easy instruments to determine the “color” of water, so Boas was thrown onto his perception. This led him to question his results and also led him to consider, after receiving his degree, the science of psychophysics.

The term had been coined in the mid-nineteenth century

by Gustav Theodor Fechner to encapsulate a set of ideas concerned with the quantitative relations between sensations and the stimuli producing them [2]. Boas was attracted to the notion due to the difficulties he encountered in his dissertation and flirted with these ideas once he returned to Berlin. He published several papers but soon wrote that he would not continue this pursuit because it took him too far afield from what he wanted to do [3].

That said, these ideas were to continue to influence his thinking during his entire career. The trip to Baffin Island that stimulated his becoming an ethnographer was initially aimed at determining the perception of water by the Indigenous people there. And the insights of psychophysics influenced one of his most important papers, “On Alternating Sounds.” [4], the context within which this paper was written is crucial to understanding how Boas used the insights of psychophysics to combat the racist attitudes of the times.

Original observers of Indigenous people used the so-called phenomenon of “alternating sounds” to indicate the primitive nature of their language. Boas had read a piece in the American Journal of Psychology about how children misheard certain sounds, particularly unfamiliar words. Realizing that the same thing could occur in adults listening to an unfamiliar language, he determined that the variation occurred in the ear of the “civilized” explorers who were listening [5]. Boas’ deep appreciation of music no doubt also helped in this perception; his daughter Franziska talks about

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her father often playing classics on the piano before breakfast [6].

Citing extensive research “being made on the faculty of individuals to recognize certain consonants and vowels;” he goes on to say: “It is well known that on hearing for the first time a word of which we do not know the derivation we are liable to misunderstand it [7].” Further: “I maintain that there is no such phenomenon as synthetic or alternating sounds and that their occurrence is in no way a sign of primitiveness of the speech in which they are said to occur; that alternating sounds are in reality alternating apperceptions of one and the same sound [8]”, In other words, the “alternation” is in the ear of the listener, not the voice of the speaker.

Though Boas was raised in a middle-class, educated family and was exposed to the humanities and the arts early in his life, he came to the humanities from the natural sciences, physics, and geography as an adult. He developed pioneering work in linguistics, the study of languages. His trip to Baffin Island led to his realization that one could not explain “a linguistic or some other cultural structure as a product of the natural environment [9]” a belief he had initially been held. He treated linguistics as a science with the rigor he had learned as a physicist. For Boas, the humanities, arts, and sciences, being products of the human mind, all could be studied with scientific rigor.

Boas similarly treated art, that is, as a window into a society. Stating that “primitive art” was art made by so-called “primitive” people, the art itself was not primitive. Although it later took Pablo Picasso and others to discover the beauty of “primitive” art, Boas saw it for what it was, a sophisticated way of expressing ones’ self and ones’ society [10].

Therefore, it should not surprise us that when he surveyed the New York City scene, he saw opportunities to bring the humanities and the sciences together. Taking advantage of a family connection, he made a sweeping proposal.

1914 found Boas writing George McAneny, President of the Board of Alderman of New York City. McAneny had married Marjorie Jacobi, daughter of Abraham Jacobi, Boas’ political mentor, supporter, and friend. Mc Aneny and Boas found they had very similar political ideas as both were very civics-minded. McAneny had an active political career, starting with reporting for the New York World on issues of civic reform. He became president of the City Club of New York, called by The New York Times “a social club with a civic purpose,” and from there went on to become Manhattan Borough President, then President of the New York City Board of Aldermen, now called the New York City Council.

In two letters to McAneny, March 2 and May 25, 1914, and a proposal included in the March 2 letter, Boas put forward a plan that would have amounted to a sweeping reorganization of the scientific and intellectual life of the city [11]. Reflecting his deep experience with both the American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University -and the connections between them about which he learned when he was jointly appointed to both - as well as research into other city institutions, he sought to overcome the significant

shortcomings in the overall intellectual life in the city he viewed as his home. (Even after he moved his family to New Jersey, he retained deep emotional ties to New York City).

Referencing a meeting between the two on February 17, Boas explained the basis of his proposal. Stating that too often, the educational work of an institution had overshadowed its scientific or artistic work, he maintained that the two activities should be kept separate.

He wrote that there was “an obvious relation between science teaching in the New York schools and the natural history collections in the museums of the City, and between history teaching and the collections of art. The work of the Board of Education might be considerably enriched by systematic cooperation with museums.” Pointing out that the museums were not readily available to students living a long subway ride away from their location, he went on to point out: “It is, therefore, worth considering whether several small museums could not serve the interests of the citizens better than constant enlargement of a few central buildings, where the schools, and particularly the branch libraries of the city, might not be utilized for this purpose, without creating the necessity of erecting many new expensive buildings or new museum wings [12].” Boas was not thinking small here, as his suggestions and questions would lead to some fundamental changes. He laid out his conclusions in the following way:

1. How could institutions devoted to science and art, and maintained in part by the city, be coordinated with the city’s general educational and scientific work?
2. What are the precise obligations of these institutions to the city?
3. What should be the relation of the City institutions to similar ones supported by private funds?

In the proposal enclosed in his March 2 letter, Boas put forward the “Establishment of a Department of two Boards - a Board of Science and Art, and a Board of Educational Development.” The boards were designed to overcome one of the critical failures, according to Boas, that afflicted the current condition of art and science, the lack of communication and even coordination among the various organizations, research institutes, museums, and the like. Boas himself had interests in many areas, art, science, and education, and he saw the advantages of a commingling of efforts and activities.

He was highly enthusiastic about his proposal, writing: “I believe it hardly necessary to dwell on the powerful influences that might be exerted by the central Boards here suggested. It seems an auspicious feature of a plan of this kind that a centre consisting of experts would be created that might assist Boards of Trustees of co-operating institutions in the formulation of their policies in such a way that co-ordination with other institutions would be obtained [13].”

McAneny quickly responded to this overture, writing to “My dear Franz” that he thought very well of his suggestions and thought that the main thing was to get the relation of the city to the institutions “properly adjusted [14].” Noting the sweep of Boas’ ideas, he pointed out that this was not going

to be easy, as it might well require a change in the city charter. He wanted to get the Board of Estimate and Apportionments involved and a technical advisor to assist the Budget Committee. Although a letter from McAneny's assistant did arrive, seeking advice from Boas on a letter inviting people to be on an advisory committee, there is no evidence of any further activity. Boas' grand plan to further democratize the City's educational effort, making the resources of the City more widely available to poor people and minorities, who tended to live far away from the museums of which Boas spoke, and therefore difficult to access for educational purposes remained just that, a potentially beneficial idea.

It is not hard to see why this idea arrived almost stillborn. As politically astute as Boas was in many areas, he is somewhat naïve here. Nowhere is evidence of his having talked to any of the organizations involved. He certainly does not indicate in any of his correspondence with McAneny that he has discussed his ideas with them. Although Boas might not have meant it this way, the proposed Boards smack of control; Boas himself speaks of "powerful influences that might be exerted." He Boas demonstrated considerable overreach, if not arrogance. Whatever benefit the idea may have generated if implemented, it would never go anywhere without sophisticated political groundwork. It is likely that McAneny himself, an experienced politician, realized this and did not want to offend his friend.

Stillborn it may have been, but this visionary proposal says a lot about Boas as a public thinker. For one thing, underlying this idea was his firm notion of the equality of the races; opportunity and cultivation create genius, not racial or class characteristics. The proposal also speaks to the importance of collaboration between the arts and the sciences for effective public communication.

Conclusion

Boas was ahead of his time. One can only imagine the benefits that would have accrued to the citizens and students of New York City and its suburbs had this proposal, or even parts of it, been enacted. And there are still lessons that can

be learned from his effort to understand how the complexity of the city's resources can be brought to bear for the benefit of its residents.

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