BOAS, Franz (1858, Minden, Westphailia-1942, New York City)

Franz Boas was a founder of the fields of modern anthropology and ethnography. He created the anthropology department at Boston’s Clark University and oversaw the creation of Columbia University’s Ph.D. in anthropology. He also held curatorial posts at the Field Museum in Chicago and at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Boas’s most significant contributions to modern thought were his rejection of biological pre-determinism (i.e., the belief in concrete, unchanging, and genetically innate racial difference) and the concomitant belief in the superiority of so-called western civilization and culture. Through a series of studies into bodily forms as well as ethnographic observation, Boas concluded that racial difference was a “plastic” (changeable) environmental adaptation rather than a concrete marker of difference, and that humanity consisted of a wide variety of cultures influenced by the sum total of the history of a people. In his most influential work, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Boas argued that the self-proclaimed superiority of European races and cultures and, more significantly, the supposed inferiority of “primitive man” were in fact byproducts of European imperialism and cultural hegemony. “The spread of the European race,” Boas wrote, “cut short the growth of the existing independent germs [read: cultures].”

Bibliography: Andrews, H. A., et al. *The Bibliography of Franz Boas.* Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, vol. 61. Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association, 1943.

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