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Boas as a Diffusionist: Boas and the anthropologist O. T. Mason engage in a spirited debate about the organization of ethnographic materials in museum displays; it is an unlikely subject for a fierce debate, but it produced an illuminating exchange. Mason, an evolutionist, proposed organizing ethnographic displays in the Smithsonian Institution by artifact classes—pottery, stone tools, musical instruments—regardless of their place of origin, displaying what Mason called “similarities in the products of industry.” Mason wanted to illustrate the evolutionary parallels in human nature, arguing that cultural products stemmed from similar, universal causes. But Boas argued to use geographical categories, instead of evolutionary trends so that museum visitors get better insight. When the items of museum were arranged according to geographical areas, it was observed that cultural items of Indian tribes that lived close to another were more similar than those groups who lived further apart. The geographical regions that displayed such internal similarities, were called as “culture area”. The isomorphism of cultural items was, thus, explained by diffusion.

Boas said that the geographical continuity of distribution was the major proof for historical connections or diffusion. A break in this continuity should be presumed as similar traits has arisen independently.

HISTORICAL PARTICULARISM

In 1896, Boas published an article entitled “The Limitation of Comparative Method of Anthropology” which dealt with his objection to evolutionary approach. Boas undercut the entire basis of nineteenth-century cultural evolution. We might agree with Tylor and Morgan that certain technological processes have an inherent evolutionary order— fire must precede pottery making, flintlocks were invented before automatic rifles—but there is no ethnographic evidence indicating that matrilineal kin systems preceded patrilineal kin systems or that religions based on animism developed before polytheistic religions. Boas argued that this unilineal ordering is a simple assumption; there is no proven historical relationship nor any way to prove such a relationship.

Boas argued that the comparative approaches of Morgan and Tylor were undercut by three flaws: (1) the assumption of unilineal evolution, **(2)** the notion of modern societies as evolutionary survivals, and **(3)** the classification of societies based on weak data and inappropriate criteria. These flaws were the targets of the Boasian attack.

It argued that each society is a collective representation of its unique historical past. Boas rejected parallel evolutionism, the idea that all societies are on the same path and have reached their specific level of development the same way all other societies have. Instead, historical particularism showed that societies could reach the same level of cultural development through different paths.

Boas suggested that diffusion, trade, corresponding environment, and historical accident may create similar cultural traits. Three factors, as suggested by Boas, are used to explain cultural customs: **environmental conditions, psychological factors, and historical connections, history being the most important** (hence the school's name).

This approach claims that each society has its own unique historical development and must be understood based on its own specific cultural and environmental context, especially its historical process. Its core

premise was that culture was a “set of ideas or symbols held in common by a group of people who see themselves as a social group”

Boas stressed on the apparently **enormous complexity of cultural variation** and perhaps because of this complexity he believed it was **premature to form universal laws**. He felt that single cultural traits have to be studied in the context of the society in which they appeared.

In it he stated that Anthropologists should spend less time in developing theories based on insufficient data. Rather they should devote their energy in collecting as much data as possible, as quickly as possible, before cultures disappeared (so many already had, after coming in contact with foreign societies). He asserted that only after this body of data was gathered could valid interpretation be made and theories proposed.

Boas' studies and his experiences among the Inuit convinced him that evolutionary anthropology was both intellectually flawed and, because it treated other people and other societies as inferior to Europeans, morally defective. Boas argued that **anthropologists should not be collectors of tales and spinners of theories** but should devote themselves to objective data collection through fieldwork. Anthropologists must live among the people they study, both observing their activities and, where possible, participating in them. They should record as much information about the group's culture as possible. Boas' style of fieldwork **became known as participant observation** and has been the hallmark of American anthropology.

Boas expected that **if tremendous quantity of data was collected the laws governing cultural variation would emerge from the mass of information by themselves**. Historical particularists criticized the theory of the nineteenth-century social evolution as non-scientific and proclaimed themselves to be free from preconceived ideas. Boas believed that if there were universal laws that could be derived from the comparative study of cultures, the ethnographic database was not yet robust enough for us to identify those laws. To that end, he and his students collected a vast amount of first-hand cultural data by conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Based on these raw data, they described particular cultures instead of trying to establish general theories that apply to all societies.

Boas also argued that **one had to carry out detailed regional studies of individual cultures** to discover the distribution on culture traits and to understand the individual process of culture change at work. In short, Boas **sought to reconstruct histories of culture**. He **stressed on meticulous collection and organization of ethnographic data on all aspects of many different societies**.

Boasian also believed that **so many different stimuli acted on the development of a culture** that this development could only be understood by first examining the particulars of a specific culture so that the source of stimuli could be identified. One of Boas' core beliefs was that **cultures are the products of their own histories**. He argued that a culture's standards of beauty and morality as well as many other aspects of behavior could be understood only in light of that culture's historical development. Because our own ideas were also the products of history, they should not be used as standards to judge other cultures. Evolutionists failed partly because they assumed, incorrectly, that the most evolved cultures were those that had values most similar to their own. In other words, the evolutionists failed because of their own ethnocentrism. In one sense, ethnocentrism is simply the belief that one's own culture is better than any other. In a deeper sense, it is precisely the application of the historical standards of beauty, worth, and morality developed in one culture to all other cultures.

People all over the world tend to see things from their own culturally patterned point of view. For example, when the people living in Highland New Guinea first saw European outsiders in the 1930s, they believed them to be the ghosts of their ancestors. It was the only way they could initially make sense of what they were seeing (Connolly and Anderson 1987).

Although most people are ethnocentric, the ethnocentrism of Western societies has had greater consequences than that of smaller, less technologically advanced, and more geographically isolated peoples. Wealth and military technology have given Westerners the ability to impose their beliefs and practices on others. It may matter little, for example, to the average Frenchman if the Dogon (an ethnic group in Mali) believe their way of life to be superior. The Dogon have little ability to affect events in France. However, French ethnocentrism mattered a great deal to the Dogon. The French colonized Mali and imposed their beliefs and institutions on its people.

Boas insisted that anthropologists free themselves, as much as possible, from ethnocentrism and approach each culture on its own terms. This position came to be known as **cultural relativism** and is one of the hallmarks of anthropology. Boas and his followers maintained that anthropologists must suspend judgment to understand the logic and dynamics of other cultures. Researchers who view the actions of other people simply in terms of the degree to which they correspond to their own notions of the ways people should behave systematically distort the cultures they study.

Boas **also focused on the role of individual to culture formation**. He said individuals react to culture in different ways. Thus, culture and personality influence each other. These insights were more systemically analyzed by latter Anthropologist, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict.

WEAKNESSES OF HISTORICAL PARTICULARISM

- The **facts that are recorded** even by the most diligent observers will necessarily **reflect what that individual considers important**. Collection done without some preliminary theorizing, without ideas about what to expect, is meaningless, for that facts that are **most important may be ignored while irrelevant may be recorded**.
- Although it was appropriate for Boas to criticize previous 'arm chair' theorizing, his concern with innumerable local details did not encourage a belief that it might be possible to explain the major variations in culture that Anthropologist observe.