

In the past two weeks, we have looked at the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, a turn of the century American sociologist who researched Black populations in American cities. We learned that one of Du Bois' central motivations in his life and work was to overturn the racist scientific consensus which held that people of African descent were incapable of equal cultural, intellectual, and practical achievements as white people. This life goal led him directly to the work of scientifically investigating the activities and conditions of life among African-descended people in the United States. He hoped that, through scientific analysis, he would disprove the assumptions of biologically-determined cultural and intellectual inferiority of Black people and other non-whites, and in doing so remove widespread racist justifications for denying Black people the rights and opportunities for participating in American society as equals. Du Bois sought to show, in works like *The Philadelphia Negro*, that Black people had plentiful skills and were capable of contributing to American civilized society. He did this through surveying Black households and workplaces and documenting the variety of skilled labor conducted by Black men and women.

We learned in our lecture two weeks ago that Du Bois encountered the work of an anthropologist called Franz Boas at his annual conference at Atlanta University in 1906, where Boas had been invited to give the commencement address. Boas was also invested in overturning racist assumptions in white society at the turn of the century, a fact some scholars connect to the fact that he was a German Jew who had experienced the unpleasant effects of racial discrimination. You may have noticed that among the races he discusses in his address to the Anthropology Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, he mentions not only Africans, Native Americans, and Asians, but Jews, Gypsies, and the Irish. Boas got along better in white society than Du Bois did, but he was certainly personally implicated, just as Du Bois was, in the scientific theories of racial groups and their mental and social capacities.

As a social scientist, Boas was also undertaking his critique of theories of racial hierarchies through scientific investigation and argument. But as an anthropologist, he was taking a different approach with somewhat different subject matter. While Du Bois was looking at the sociological conditions of labor, housing, marital status, income, and the like, among African Americans, Boas was studying different cultures, nations, societies, and tribes within and outside the United States. He was studying the art, social and political organization, language, kinship relations, architecture, and religions, of large civilizations and small tribes across the world. In doing so, he was pointing out the significant cultural and scientific achievements of non-white races to challenge the idea that white societies were at a higher stage of cultural advancement and civilization because of their superior racial aptitude. For example, in his commencement address, Boas said,

“While much of the history of early invention is shrouded in darkness, it seems likely that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron. Consider for a moment what this invention has meant for the advance of the human race.”

Seeing the ways his own anti-racist goals aligned and were supported by Boas', Du Bois was impressed and influenced by his work. Years later, in 1939, Du Bois recalled Boas' commencement address, saying,

“Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching history in 1906 and said to a graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of the Black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted”

With this anthropological perspective of the civilized cultures of Africa, Du Bois had further evidence that Black people in America were not incapable of civilization, and moral, intellectual, and cultural achievement on the basis of their African race.

This week, we're going to be looking at the arguments of Franz Boas and how his ideas about the advancement and development of race and civilization influenced mainstream assumptions about the aptitude and capacities of non-white races. This was particularly important when it came to popular beliefs and attitudes about the place of Black people in American society, who were still struggling half a century after the abolition of slavery to be recognized and treated as equals. Boas' criticisms of assumptions concerning the correlation and close connection between biological race and capacity for cultural civilization were important challenges to arguments that Black people were not capable of participating and contributing as equals in white-dominated American society.

We will also consider how a central social scientific concept took shape through Boas' theorizing about the relationship between race and civilization—that is, the concept of culture. Although the word culture was used consistently throughout Boas' work and the work of others in this period, as Stocking points out, an important shift took place in the way this concept was understood and applied. Through his challenges to theories of the connection between racial and cultural evolution, Boas was an important figure in developing a modern anthropological concept of culture, which did not view culture as evolving along a linear scale towards European forms of civilization. Instead, we start to see in Boas' work an understanding of culture as a set of customs and habits that are passed down through generations or transmitted between one group and another in ways that are influenced both by the particularities of environment and the contingencies of history.

So there are two things going on in Boas' writings that we need to pay attention to in this lecture. They are related, but they are distinct. The first is the distinction Boas makes between race and civilization. Race, he says, is not a causal determinant of civilization. European nations are not scientifically advanced, for example, because white races are evolutionarily superior. Boas argues that differences of racial capacity have much less to do with level, stage, or degree of civilization among the world's races than his contemporaries were claiming. This is the claim that we find made explicitly in Boas' works that we've read.

Then, there is a second thing, which is only implicitly found in Boas' writings, but which George Stocking Jr argues for in his secondary historical work on Boas. This can be thought of as the

separation of the concepts “civilization” and “culture.” The concept of culture starts to be expressed in Boas’ work as something quite different to the way it had been formerly understood by people like Tylor and Spencer in the 19th century. Instead of being seen as a capacity that is manifested in degrees along a linear developmental scale, with Europeans of course being understood as the most cultured and people of African descent invariably being seen as the least cultured, culture starts to be expressed in Boas’ work as a set of inherited customs, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors which varies between groups. So although Boas may be found still arguing that Europeans have a higher degree or advancement of civilization, the same is not true of culture. Europeans have European culture and the Kwakiutl people have Kwakiutl culture. They are manifestations not of different stages of one unilinear culture, but of distinct historically influenced particular cultures, in the plural.

Let’s start by looking at Boas’ explicit arguments for conceptually separating race and civilization in his 1894 work, “Human Faculty as Determined by Race” which he presented as his outgoing address as Vice President of the Anthropology Section of the American Society for the Advancement of Science.

First of all, what does Boas mean by civilization? Well, on the first page, which is page 3, he says that civilization is the capacity that human beings have developed to conquer the forces of nature and compel them to serve their own interests. He appears to be talking about scientific and technological achievement mostly, rather than aesthetic and spiritual achievements. He means by civilization the human ability to transform the living environment in such a way as to bend it to their will, their needs, and desires. Giving examples, he says,

“[Man] has transformed inhospitable forests into fertile fields. The mountain fastnesses are yielding their treasures to his demands. The fierce animals which are obstructing his progress are being exterminated, while others which are useful to him are made to increase a thousand fold. The waves of the ocean carry him from land to land and towering mountain ranges set him no bounds. His genius has moulded inert matter into powerful machines which wait a touch of his hand to serve his manifold demands.”

These examples translate to deforestation, agriculture, the extraction of natural resources, the extermination of species, the selective breeding and domestication of other species, shipbuilding and navigation, industrialization and machinery. It is somewhat ironic that many of these markers of civilization, which were then employed rhetorically to set apart white people as higher or more advanced than other races and civilizations, are now generally recognized as a catastrophe which may very well destroy human and animal habitats worldwide.

But anyway, 130 years ago, this was what Boas described as the pinnacle of civilization achieved by white people of European descent. This high level of achievement in transforming the world and extracting and bending natural environments to their own will was the major piece of evidence white populations in the united states at that time considered themselves to be a superior race when compared with their native American and Black American compatriots. The social or cultural aspects of humanity and the biological, physical, or racial aspects were assumed to go hand in hand. Since it was widely accepted that white-dominated Euro-American civilization was much more

advanced than other societies, so it was assumed that white bodies were biologically superior. This superiority was an evolutionary one, which assumed further progress along a linear path of development. Human beings all had an immanent tendency to develop in a specific direction towards greater civilization, so those who were at a given time more civilized had come further along the path of development than those who were less civilized at that time. And it was not only cultural and technological elements of humanity which had reached different stages of evolution, but their biological-physical forms as well. So, the assumption went that Europeans were the pinnacles of biological and cultural and psychological evolution, and the races of America (the native populations), Asia, Australasia, and Africa were located at less advanced stages of the same evolutionary trajectory. This was, naturally, of great importance in the debates concerning “the negro problem” which we learned about a few weeks ago. This social problem, as it was perceived and debated at the time, concerned how recently-freed Black populations of African descent were to be managed, integrated, or otherwise directed in American society. If, as many white people assumed, African-descended people were not capable of the same degree of civilization due to their racial inferiority, then this would of course influence the best way to structure the relations and interactions between Blacks and whites in America, as well as the opportunities and rights that should be given to Black Americans.

Now, as we have seen in past weeks, Du Bois spent a great deal of his life arguing against the assumption of Black racial inferiority, and tried to persuade people through his scientific sociology that Black people were physically, biologically, and mentally capable of skilled artisanship, thrift, impulse control, intellectual work, social sophistication, and that the main factors holding them back from economic and social achievements matching white people were social factors like racism, poverty, and lack of opportunities.

Boas attacked the same assumption of racial inferiority using scientific investigation, but from the different angle of anthropology. He said, we may very well accept that white people have actually achieved for themselves an unmatched degree of civilization. But in order to be scientifically justified in attributing this discrepancy of achievement to different racial capacities, you must prove not only that the civilization is higher, but also that the aptitude for civilization is higher among white races. This, he said, had not been proven. And he provided extensive and detailed criticisms of the scientific evidence and the logical inferential reasoning which had been used to arrive at the conclusion that racial inferiority was responsible for different levels of civilization.

One problem he raised with the evidence employed to support the conclusion of white superiority was that any divergence from whiteness was automatically considered an indication of inferiority. This meant that the conclusion was assumed, rather than demonstrated. It was simply the differences of other races anatomically and other cultures socially or psychologically that could be demonstrated, but the inference was made from this difference to the conclusion of inferiority. As Boas pointed out, this is begging the question.

Another problem Boas raises is the convenient ignoring of historical advances of civilization among non-white people, which often exceeded the achievements of European populations at that time.

Boas describes the civilizations in the Middle East, China, and Peru, which had domesticated plants and animals, build great architectural works, and structured themselves in sophisticated ecclesiastical, economic, and political institutions. “At the same period,” he says, “the ancestors of the races, who are now among the most highly civilized, were in no way superior to primitive man as we find him now in regions that have not come into contact with modern civilization.” Since we do not attribute those races a higher aptitude for civilization than white people on the basis of their significantly superior civilizing advances at that time, we cannot consistently attribute white people a higher aptitude for their apparently superior civilization at the turn of the 20th century.

Boas also criticized the accounts of travelers which were used to show that so-called primitive people lacked sophisticated mental capacities. For example, travelers would report back that members of tribes around the world they met were fickle, impulsive, and lacked emotional restraint, originality, and concentration skills. But Boas said, travelers are biased in their interpretations of the behavior of foreign people because they are not taking into account the different motivations and priorities of those people. For example, they may not have a lot of patience when it comes to answering the traveler’s boring and simplistic questions about everyday affairs. But if you question them about something they find sincerely important, they can discuss matters at length. Similarly, if the person being questioned seems to get upset or angered at something trivial, it may very well not appear trivial to them. On the other hand, they might be equally confused and critical of the traveler’s anger when their journey experiences a delay. What might seem minor to the so-called primitive individual may be a severe delay to the traveler. In neither case would it be appropriate to make a sweeping generalization about their respective capacities for emotional restraint. The appropriate way to compare the aptitudes of different people, Boas said, is “to compare their behavior in undertakings which are equally important to each.”

By arguing that each of these people should be judged according to their own standards, taking into account what is important to them and what their society dictates are appropriate and worthwhile behaviors, Boas is making one of the first claims towards a form of cultural relativism. Throughout this piece of work, Boas is saying that difference from white people and white culture alone is not enough to judge the quality or advancement of a people or culture. We need to take people’s social structures and behaviors on their own terms, and judge them according to the internal principles of their own society. It is not enough to say that, since the actions or customs appear irrational to a white person, they must be an indication of inferiority. The job of the anthropologist, which would become increasingly recognized throughout the 20th century, is to enter into the internal logic and structure of reasons of the society they are studying, and try to figure out what their motivations, values, principles, and priorities are, and why their observed behaviors, customs, and institutional practices make sense within that framework. This cultural relativism was a far cry from the white supremacy that was prevalent among anthropologists and the general public at that time, and is considered one of the most important innovations of early-20th century anthropology and one of the major contributions of Franz Boas to its development.

The more technical aspects of Boas’ theory are important to understand. The most significant and broad challenge Boas presented to contemporary arguments for the racially determined limitations

of non-white populations was his criticism of the anthropological paradigm of independent invention, and his development of the alternative paradigm of diffusionism. These were competing theoretical frameworks for interpreting evidence and constructing theories concerning how civilization and cultural innovation developed and spread across the globe. When anthropologists found two similar types of technology or cultural practice in societies in different geographic regions, there were two general theories which could explain it: Firstly, the same technology or idea had independently occurred within different groups as part of a natural course of universal human development; or second, the technology or idea could have spread—or diffused—from one location to another. If it had diffused, there were two ways this might have happened. Either the technology or idea had been passed along from one group to another through contact and communication, in which one group learned and adopted things from another. Or the group who originally had the idea might have themselves spread out over a wider area and taken the technology or idea with them.

The independent invention paradigm supported the notion of a linear development of racial and cultural evolution, in which some races were located at an earlier stage of development. The reason is that if different groups are independently coming up with the same idea or technology, for example, a particular kind of spearhead or a particular origin myth, then it suggests that there are universal laws governing the development of humanity and civilization in a given direction which will manifest in all groups along their way towards higher civilization. If two groups can be seen to independently invent the same technology or idea, it would be because they are at roughly the same stage of development and they are manifesting the same universal law which dictates how human beings will think and act at their shared stage of development.

Boas' diffusionism disrupted this interpretation. Using his analysis of the folklore of native American tribes, Boas argued that the distribution of similarities and differences between them could be better explained by the diffusion of ideas between groups than it could by independent invention. There were therefore no scientific grounds for concluding that there were recurring cultural types caused by a set of universal laws of cultural development.

Advancements of civilization and culture, Boas argued, took place gradually through the transmission of ideas and inventions across different groups. On page 5 of his 1894 address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, he says,

“Proofs without number have been forthcoming which show that ideas have been disseminated as long as people have come into contact with each other and that neither race nor language nor distance limits their diffusion. As all have worked together in the development of the ancient civilizations, we must bow to the genius of all, whatever race they may represent.”

By arguing for his diffusionist principle, ideas about the mental capacities and civilizing capacities of non-white races, like Black populations in America, took on a new shape. Rather than Europeans demonstrating higher civilization because of their more advanced evolutionary status, what Boas argued had taken place historically was that the centers of civilization had been shifting back and forth between many groups through the transmission of inventions and ideas. What this meant for Boas was that all races of people had contributed to the gradual development of inventions and

ideas that had led humanity to the point where they had domesticated plants and animals, and invented machines, technologies of extraction and navigation.

This is partly what he had expressed in his address at the Atlanta conference in a way that had so impressed Du Bois. Recall that Boas had stated in his commencement address, “it seems likely that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron. Consider for a moment what this invention has meant for the advance of the human race.” In pointing out the inventions and achievements of African societies at a time when white European populations were much less advanced, Boas was presenting evidence in direct opposition to the widespread assumption that white people achieved high levels of civilization—like the markers we mentioned of domestication of plants and animals, machinery, navigation, extraction, architecture—because of their more evolutionarily advanced race. Africans likely had made large strides of invention and the capacity to bend the forces of nature to their will, like smelting iron, at a time when Europeans were struggling with basic stone tools. How could this be so if white people have a greater aptitude for civilization?

With regard to the issue of the role and place of Black populations in the United States, Boas argues the same conclusion as W.E.B. Du Bois, but from a very different perspective: that Black people can just as well participate in and contribute to American civilization, and there is nothing in the racial aptitude of Black people that would prevent them from doing so.

He then goes on to give historical and environmental reasons why groups can more or less quickly and easily assimilate the cultural influences and civilizing advances of neighboring groups. Far from being determined by racial aptitude, he argued that racism against Black people and assumptions of their inferiority are the factors holding them back in the United States. “It is hardly possible to say,” he says on page 9 of his 1894 address, “what would become of the negro if he were able to live with the whites on absolutely equal terms.” As we’ve seen in our readings, white society tended to explain the difficulties experienced by Black people by assuming that they were simply not capable of succeeding in civilized society. We even read a journalist’s account of the white supremacist coup in Wilmington which justified their violent take-over of the political seats held by elected Black individuals, by saying that Black people were not competent enough to run the city. In this extremely racist national environment, Boas argued just like Du Bois that Black people in America were struggling to improve their economic conditions in society not because they were doomed to fail on the basis of their inferior racial capacity, but because their society was not giving them a chance.

This brings us to our second point of focus – the changing concept of culture, which we learned about in the Stocking reading. Stocking outlines two general concepts of culture: the humanist and the anthropological.

The humanist concept of culture is sort of like the concept of civilization. In this framework, culture is progressive; it improves and builds upon itself and advances towards greater and greater achievements. For a society to develop culturally is for a society to progress towards greater advances in the markers of civilization that we discussed earlier—agriculture, animal husbandry,

extraction of natural resources, deforestation, invention of machinery, industrialization, navigation and shipbuilding, and probably advanced weaponry is in there too. In this concept of culture, there is one thing—culture—which all societies have more or less of, depending on how far they have progressed.

The anthropological concept of culture, instead, is plural. There are many cultures. The Welsh have Welsh culture, the Iranians have Iranian culture, the Yoruba have Yoruba culture, the Kwakiutl have Kwakiutl culture, and so on. Culture, of one form or another, is something all societies have equally—it doesn't come in degrees and develop and enhance as a society progresses. In fact, culture is not progressive at all. In the humanist concept, culture is something that helps improve and enhance society; in the anthropological concept, that is not necessarily the case. Culture influences forms of human activity in a variety of ways, but they are not necessarily better or worse. Sometimes a culture can even hold people back from making needed changes to their institutions and practices. The anthropological concept of culture, then, is somewhat like tradition, customs, inherited behaviors from previous generations.

In the humanist concept, culture was something advanced civilizations had developed which had freed them from the forces and control of nature. It was less advanced societies who had “not succeeded in subduing nature; who labor to eke a meagre existence out of the products of the wilderness;...who remain restricted by ocean, river or mountains; who strive to obtain the necessities of life with the help of few and simple instruments”—it was they who were bound and weighed down by tradition and custom. The advanced civilizations of Europe had evolved culture—which was creativity and invention—to free them from both nature and the irrational instinctual or customary behaviors of their primitive past.

What Stocking is claiming in this paper is that amidst all of this theorizing of Boas' about race and culture and civilization, in this broader social and intellectual context of racism in the United States and colonialism abroad, he was participating in a gradual and subtle conceptual shift in the way people understood culture—from the humanist concept of imaginative, inventive creativity and progress, into the anthropological concept so important for the development of the discipline of anthropology in the 20th century of inherited customary and traditional behavior and beliefs. In the anthropological understanding of culture that Boas was developing, all societies had their own version of culture, including European societies, and all were therefore bound by tradition and custom. European societies were not breaking away from inherited customary behaviors and beliefs; they just had their own versions of inherited customary behaviors and beliefs.

In Stocking's words, Boas argued that “the behavior of all men, regardless of race or cultural stage, was determined by a traditional body of habitual behavioral patterns passed on through what we would now call the enculturative process and buttressed by ethically tainted secondary rationalizations” (222).

Boas began making claims that suggested that European culture was not freer from custom or tradition than any other culture, even those societies that many people at the time considered vastly inferior. Even the European Enlightenment modes of thought were, according to Boas, a form of

folklore—a set of customary cultural beliefs that structured European institutions and collective behavior. He suggested even that Western science experienced cultural influences of tradition and custom, which made it resistant to theoretical innovation. European scientific and rational beliefs, according to Boas, were just like the folklore and cosmological beliefs of other cultures—they rationalized and made stable a certain set of shared social expectations and behaviors through which a society made sense of the world around them and engaged in cooperative behavior. This was very similar, he claimed, to the myths and tales of the Native Americans Boas studied which made sense of their own social structure and collective behaviors, and rationalized their forms of life. Presenting European science and rationality as just another form of inherited cultural belief which provided a justification for certain forms of collective behavior and belief was a far cry from the former humanist understanding of European culture as manifesting progress and freedom from the primitive and animalistic evolutionary past.

One final thing I want to cover in this lecture is a historiographical point—that is, I want to talk about the methods and the kinds of claims we found in the secondary source we read for this week. What we see in the work by Stocking is not just an interesting thesis, but an example of a certain type of intellectual history—the history of ideas—in which we try to figure out how the thoughts of certain people, and with them the thoughts of certain societies, altered over the course of a certain period of time. This is quite an abstract psychological and at times very philosophical form of history in which we piece together attitudes and beliefs—that is, the quite invisible phenomena of the human mind—to understand what path the concepts we take for granted today took in their development and inheritance through historical generations of thinkers. This is my favorite kind of history, and it might appeal to some of you who are interested in doing more philosophical or conceptual work. Let's take a moment to examine and play around with this kind of history of ideas.

Now, as Stocking says, making these kinds of claims about shifting concepts and understandings can be quite difficult because the changes are often slow and gradual. They also find subtle expression in the historical remains because, as Stocking says near the beginning of this paper, these changes are not always or even usually immediately apparent in texts because they don't find clear expression in the terminology and the words used. So, for example, Stocking takes two pieces by Boas—his 1894 address and the Introduction to his 1911 publication, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, the former of which Boas copied and pasted sections and reused them in the latter. So you find entire paragraphs or sets of sentences that are identical, or almost identical in both documents, because Boas took sections of his 1894 address and used them in his 1911 Introduction. So Stocking points out that in segments of text which Boas republished, he replaced his use of the word “culture” with the word “civilization” instead, and he claims that he did so because he was coming to a new anthropological understanding of culture as non-progressive and plural, making “culture” an inappropriate word for the statements he was making. “Civilization” was the meaning he was getting at, and “culture” for him was starting to mean something very different—something like the anthropological understanding of tradition and inherited custom. He also suggests that this is reflected in Boas' use of “culture” in the plural—that is, “cultures.” And indeed, if you do a quick document search—both Boas documents are searchable—you do find a difference in the use of the plural—cultures. Not a single use of the plural

form occurs in Boas' 1894 address, but in his 1911 publication, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, I found two uses in the Introduction and 35 uses in the whole book. However, this claim of Stocking's is not unchallengeable. Two uses of the term "cultures" in the Introduction is not really a lot to base such a grand claim on. And if you look through the two documents and make a comparison of the sentences which are copied and pasted—yes, some of them do replace the word culture with the word civilization, but other sentences still retain the use of the word "culture" in what seems to be a very humanist way—that is, some uses of the word "culture" in the 1911 Introduction still seem to be using it to mean something like creative, progressive, inventive civilization. So it's not entirely clear-cut. This is something you might be interested in looking at yourself and raising in your discussion section. Are you convinced by Stocking's claim? Do you think the textual evidence is strong enough? Keep in mind that in the history of ideas, textual evidence is rarely perfect, so we often have to go on subtle clues. I'll leave that for you to ponder.

OK, that's all for this lecture. Feel free to add questions or comments.