

# **ANTHROPOLOGY AND MODERN LIFE**

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Anthropology and modern life by Franz Boas & Ruth Bunzel

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**FRANZ BOAS & RUTH BUNZEL**

**ANTHROPOLOGY  
AND MODERN LIFE**



\$1.85



# FRANZ BOAS



With an  
Introduction  
by  
RUTH  
BUNZEL

The eminent cultural anthropologist discusses the relation between race and culture; nationalism; international relations; interracial relations; and the comparison of primitive culture with modern civilization.

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31 1/2 pages

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FRANZ BOAS

With a New Introduction by  
RUTH BUNZEL

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## INTRODUCTION

"The American Anthropological Association repudiates statements now appearing in the United States that Negroes are biologically and in innate mental ability inferior to whites, and reaffirms the fact that there is no scientifically established evidence to justify the exclusion of any race from the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. The basic principles of equality of opportunity and equality before the law are compatible with all that is known about human biology. All races possess the abilities needed to participate fully in the democratic way of life and in modern technological civilization."

—Passed at the Annual Meeting of the  
Council of Fellows of the American  
Anthropological Association,  
November 17, 1961.

ON NOVEMBER 17, 1961, the Council of Fellows of the American Anthropological Association meeting at Philadelphia, the cradle of American democracy, passed this resolution, thus once more providing scientific support for those fighters for equality and brotherhood for whom democracy is a moral issue. At this moment of history when the specter of racism is once more walking abroad, it is especially fortunate and appropriate to have reissued in a popular edition the definitive statement on race and culture by the man who more than anyone else was responsible for providing the conceptual framework and scientific underpinnings for the anthropological position on this important contemporary problem. Franz Boas wrote *Anthropology and Modern Life* as a declaration of faith after more than thirty years of research in the field of race and culture. An earlier publication on the same theme was translated into German (*Kultur und Rasse*, Leipzig, 1914) and was eventually honored by a prominent place in the Nazi *auto-da-fé*.

When Boas first turned to anthropology in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, "ethnography" consisted largely of unsystematic observations of primitives by untrained observers and travelers, while "ethnology" consisted mainly of speculations on the history of civilization, with little reference to observed facts. Both approaches to the science of man were equally unrelated to the problems of modern life. So long as "savages" were regarded as a different species or an inferior and undeveloped branch of the human race, little could be learned from them, and the study of their strange customs had a purely antiquarian and collector's interest. Boas, however, early recognized the broader implications of anthropological studies. Writing in 1889 he said, "Investigations [of the different forms of family structure] show that emotional reactions which we feel as natural are in reality culturally determined. It is not easy for us to understand that the emotional relation between father and son should be different from the one to which we are accustomed, but knowledge of the life of people with a social organization different from ours brings about situations in which conflicts or mutual obligations arise of a character quite opposed to those we are accustomed to and that run counter to what we consider 'natural' emotional reactions to those to whom we are related by blood. The data of ethnology prove that not only our knowledge, but also our emotions are the result of the forms of our social life and of the history of the people to whom we belong. If we desire to understand the development of human culture we must try to free ourselves of these shackles. . . . We must lay aside many points of view that seem to us self-evident, because in early times they were not self-evident. It is impossible to determine *a priori* those parts of our mental life that are common to mankind as a whole and those due to the culture in which we live. A knowledge of the data of ethnology enables us to attain this insight. Therefore it enables us also to view our own civilization objectively."

One of the first controversies of the many that filled Boas' turbulent life was over the arrangement of museum collections, Boas staunchly defending his geographical and tribal classification against upholders of the more traditional arrangements by types of artifacts. He felt that one of the functions of a museum was to "educate and entertain" and that ethnological collections should be presented so as to illustrate ways of life rather than scientific typologies. His principles won out in all American museums (except the United States National Museum) as well as in many European museums. This was one of the many ways

in which Boas sought to use anthropology to free men's minds of the yoke of traditional patterns of thought by confronting audiences with different and coherent styles of life.

Boas was educated in the tradition of liberal romanticism that produced Carl Schurz and the philosophical anarchists of the nineteenth century. He was the essential protestant; he valued autonomy above all things and respected the unique potentialities of each individual. He believed that man was a rational animal and could, with persistent effort, emancipate himself from superstition and irrationality and lead a sane and reasonable life in a good society—although he was fully aware that humanity had a long way to go to achieve this goal. This partly explains his unalterable opposition to Freud and psychoanalysis with its essentially tragic view of life and its acceptance of irrationality as an essential part of the human condition. During the last years of his life (he died during World War II) a deep depression overwhelmed him as he watched the rising tides of hatred and war. But although age and illness made him feel helpless, his faith in man never wavered. "If I were young I would *do* something," he said to a colleague who had remarked how difficult it must be for their students growing up in the midst of the Depression and under the threat of war. Always the activist!

For Boas, "doing something" always meant using his science in the cause of man. His object was the enlightenment of mankind through anthropology. He was a tireless lecturer, although he disliked public appearances and partial paralysis made speaking difficult for him. He was an indefatigable contributor to scientific journals and mass media, and a constant writer of "letters to the editor." As a teacher his influence was inestimable. He established anthropology as an academic discipline in America. Alexander F. Chamberlain, his student at Clark University, won the first doctorate in anthropology to be granted by an American university, and for more than forty years almost every anthropologist in America came directly or indirectly under Boas' influence. Among his students in the early days at Columbia were such distinguished anthropologists as Alfred L. Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Alexander Goldenweiser, Edward Sapir, Clark Wissler, Paul Radin, and Leslie Spier. During the twenties Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Melville J. Herskovits and Otto Klineberg were all Boas students, as well as a host of less well-known scholars who set up departments and conducted research in all parts of the world. As a teacher Boas was a stern taskmaster; he made no concessions to ignorance. He gave