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**Culture versus Biology in the Thought of
Franz Boas and Alfred L. Kroeber**

CARL N. DEGLER

*With comments by
Marshall Hyatt and Barbara Duden*



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The Dimensions of Franz Boas's Thought on Environment and Culture:
A Response to Carl N. Degler

Marshall Hyatt

Rereading Boas: A Woman Historian's
Response to Carl N. Degler

Barbara Duden



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Preface

One of the purposes of the German Historical Institute is to support interdisciplinary studies and to promote research on comparative topics. There are a number of ways to approach these most fascinating areas of scholarly pursuit: we can examine the importance of nonhistorical research for the work of historians; we can also analyze historical writings in which historical insight is used to interpret the results of research in other fields; and we can study the work of those scholars who have bridged the gap between disciplines. I am very grateful to Carl Degler for addressing an interdisciplinary topic in our Second Annual Lecture. I am also grateful to Professors Barbara Duden and Marshall Hyatt for discussing Professor Degler's arguments in their comments. Our Second Annual Lecture has been both a scholarly and a festive occasion. It is our hope that the papers which were delivered will come to the attention of our colleagues in the fields of history and anthropology.

HARTMUT LEHMANN
Washington, D. C., March 1989

Culture versus Biology in the Thought of Franz Boas and Alfred L. Kroeber

Carl N. Degler

In the history of many fields of inquiry there comes a time when the standard or accepted modes of explanation or analysis shift fundamentally and dramatically. This occurred in the social sciences in the course of the first third of the twentieth century. Biology in the shape of racial explanations for human behavioral differences was replaced by a new explanatory mode: that of social environment or culture. By the 1930s it was about as difficult to locate an American social scientist who *accepted* a racial explanation for human behavior as it had been easy to find one in 1900. How did this pervasive change in outlook among social scientists in the United States come about? Only the beginnings of that change can be discussed here, but those beginnings are central to understanding the transformation. They not only provided the catalyst for change, but also shaped the content of the concept of culture, a concept that became fundamental in twentieth-century social science.

Two anthropologists, Franz Boas and his former student, Alfred L. Kroeber, laid the foundation for that concept. What their conception of culture was, why they seem to have developed it, and why other social scientists accepted it are the questions I am trying to answer. First, permit me to say something about the two principals in relation to the circumstance that caused these remarks to be made at all, namely, their common background as men of German culture working in the United States.

Franz Boas was born in 1858 and educated in the mid-nineteenth-century Rhenish parts of Germany. He came to America as an adult and became a United States citizen in 1891, soon after his immigration. However, at his death in 1942 his spoken English was still shaped by his German birth and rearing. Kroeber, it is true, was born in the United States, but he too can be seen as German: his parents were not only immigrants from the Rhineland, but they brought him up in a German-speaking neighborhood in New York

City. Alfred Kroeber's first language, like Boas's, was German, not English. Boas was born a Jew, though he prided himself on having escaped any religious upbringing. Kroeber was similarly without any early religious training. Born of Protestant parents, Kroeber's first wife was a Jewish woman of mostly German origin, who died seven years after their marriage. Both men, in short, grew up in that liberal German bourgeois atmosphere of the late nineteenth century in which religion and ethnicity were unimportant so long as one was German in culture.

Boas and Kroeber each retained a deep and abiding connection with his German background, even though anti-Semitism had been one reason Boas left Germany. Kroeber's second wife tells us that throughout his life her husband loved the German language "for its poetic beauty and emotional power." Boas, for his part, helped to found a German cultural society in New York City and served as its secretary for a number of years. In that capacity, he exerted considerable effort in luring German professors to the United States and in raising funds for their visits. He himself traveled back to Germany more than a dozen times after his emigration; on one of those visits he donated a part of his library to Kiel University, where he had earned his doctorate. His last visit was in 1931. A trivial and yet revealing sign of Boas's continuing connection with his former *Vaterland* was his request in 1906 to President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University that Butler send congratulations to Kaiser Wilhelm II on the occasion of the latter's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that during the First World War Boas was sufficiently pro-German to be in danger of losing his post at Columbia University.

Kroeber parted from Boas on the question of the German state. During the war Kroeber was so hostile to Germany that he found it difficult to use the term "culture" because of the negative connotation then surrounding the German equivalent, *Kultur*. Much as he loved the language of Germany, "he never felt at ease there," his wife remembered. Boas, in contrast, remained so much a part of German culture that, as late as April 1933, he carefully distinguished between what he described as the "ruffianism" of the new Hitler government and the Germany to which he was still deeply attached.

Boas and Kroeber differed in other ways as well, ways that help to explain their respective contributions to the evolution of the concept of culture. Boas entered anthropology from physics and geography; therefore precise methods and mathematics were important ingredients in all of his work. He taught statistics, for

example, from the beginning to the end of his career at Columbia. Kroeber, conversely, took almost all of his work in English literature while an undergraduate at Columbia College; only as a senior, when he enrolled in a course in linguistics with Boas, did he turn to anthropology. Still, that first intellectual love is reflected in his later emphasis upon history, in his study of psychoanalysis, and in the opening of a practice in San Francisco for three years, the last much to Boas's disapproval. Boas, once thinking to reprove Kroeber, called him "epicurean," a term that Kroeber, however, greeted with pleasure and recognition.

As will become apparent, Boas's German origins played a significant role in the intellectual evolution of the idea of culture. I begin the examination of Boas's conception of culture, however, with two of his works that appeared in the same year, 1911. One is his best-known book, *The Mind of Primitive Man*; the other is the much less familiar study *Changes in the Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants*, which was actually a report in a multivolume study of immigration authorized by Congress.

Both of the 1911 works declared war on the significance of race and the power of heredity. The heart of the message of *Mind of Primitive Man* was that so-called savages were no different in mental ability than civilized people, a principle that in Boas's judgment applied to people of all races. Neither the book nor the principle was new. In fact, *The Mind of Primitive Man* consisted largely of essays published years before, rearranged, partly rewritten, and brought together between covers.

The study on changes in bodily shapes was quite different; it was a fresh examination that aimed a stunning blow at those who doubted the power of environment. Boas measured the heads of several thousand immigrant boys in New York City and reported a surprising finding: their head shapes changed after they had been in the United States for a certain number of years. At that time physical anthropologists frequently used a measure called the cephalic index, which was the width of the head divided by the length. For years, such a measure had been used to identify various racial types around the world. Because the index did not change over time it was considered a valuable tool. That Boas should find the heads of male children, all born of the same parents, altering within ten years after the parents came to the United States was, as he phrased it in his report, "surprising." Since the children's parents were the same, environment was 'the only influence that could have brought about the change.

In his report, Boas directed attention to one set of results that was even more striking in showing the effect of environment on what was generally considered to be the most stable measure of racial identity. This finding concerned the head shapes of children born of Sicilian and of Russian Jewish parents in Europe and of those children born of the same parents in the United States. The cephalic indices of the two sets of European-born children diverged significantly: Sicilians were broad-headed, Russian Jewish children long-headed. But when Boas measured the heads of those children born in the United States, the cephalic indices of the Russian Jewish and Sicilian children converged: that is, the usually broad-headed Sicilians were now less broad, and the normally long-headed Russian Jews were now broader. Boas offered no explanation for this alteration in racial characteristic after the parents had been in the United States only ten years, but he certainly stressed it as an important piece of evidence for believing in the power of environment over heredity.

Dramatic as this particular piece of evidence was, it came late in Boas's own career and, as we will see, late in the course of his influence upon other social scientists. What kinds of arguments and evidence, then, did Boas draw upon in order to arrive at the antibiological conclusions that were summed up in his *Mind of Primitive Man* and implied in his study of bodily changes in immigrant children?

In fact, there are no obvious turning points or crucial findings to account for Boas's conclusions or his influence on others. Long before he completed the immigrant study, he had already reached the conclusions which that study supported. An examination of his writings prior to 1911, however, can provide some insight into the development of his thought. Boas's attack on the concept of biological race as a behavioral determinant breaks down into several parts.

The first and most important form of his criticism was historical and strongly relativistic. As early as 1887 he wrote that "it cannot be said too frequently, that our reasoning is not an absolutely logical one, but that it is influenced by the reasoning of our predecessors and by our historical environment; therefore, our conclusions and theories," he insisted, must be shaped by these forces as well. "Former events," he wrote in another place that same year, "leave their stamp on the present character of a people." Consequently, he continued, "the physiological and psychological state of an organism at a certain moment is a function of its whole history." Con-

trary to what racists of the time were contending, "the character or future development of a biological and ethnological phenomenon," Boas emphasized, "is not expressed by its appearance, by the state in which it is, but by its whole history."

Again and again, Boas drew upon history to answer those who deemed western Europeans to be superior in civilization to primitive people. The difference between the civilization of the Old World and the New, he maintained, was "only a difference in time." One was culturally ahead of the other, but only by a difference of three or four thousand years. "The difference in period," Boas explained, "does not justify us to assume that the race which developed more slowly was less gifted. Certainly the difference of a few thousand years is insignificant as compared with the age of the human race."

If a skeptic had asked Boas how he could be sure that in time any people could reach the achievement of the highest civilization known, Boas's most general answer would have been that all people are essentially alike in their intellectual or cultural potentialities. If the skeptic had persisted and inquired how Boas could be certain of that, there would have been no general answer, only quite specific responses designed to call into question the assertions of those who believed that biology or race accounted for differences in cultural achievement. Writers like Herbert Spencer, who had drawn upon biology to account for differences in culture, argued that savages lacked certain important mental attributes possessed by modern, civilized people, such as foresight or emotional discipline.

Thus, Boas's second mode of attack on race was to question the ethnological evidence advanced by authorities like Spencer. One approach was to interpret the ethnological evidence differently. When Spencer argued that certain behavior showed that primitive people were impulsive and therefore lacked a necessary trait to develop civilization, Boas countered by saying that "impulse" among primitive people was little more than the optimism of the modern businessman and hardly to be deplored. "We may recognize a difference in the degree of improvidence caused by the difference of social status," he admitted, "but not a specific difference between lower and higher types of man." Another approach followed by Boas was to challenge directly the validity of the ethnological evidence itself, often on the basis of his own work in the field. To show that primitive people were less attentive than civilized people; Spencer had quoted from a European's report on a certain Amerindian tribe. Boas responded to that by remarking, "I

happened to know through personal contact, the tribes mentioned." He was sure that the questions asked of the Amerindians by the European visitor were seen by them as trivial, so naturally they paid no attention. He, on the other hand, could testify from his own experience "that the interest of these natives can easily be raised to a high pitch and that I have often been the one who was wearied out first."

For Boas, a third order of criticism was to draw upon his fieldwork more positively—to show from the language, the folklore, and the music of primitive peoples that they were not different from civilized people in their emotions or intellectual abilities. The commonality of all peoples, Boas argued, came through forcefully in that all of them had fire, all cooked, all were social, all practiced marriage outside the group (exogamy), and most had some rituals concerning life after death, as well as a place above and a place below the earth where people went after death.

The final critical approach taken by Boas was to ask for more convincing proof of biological influence. That is, he placed the burden of proof on those who accepted a racial explanation. He did this, it is worth noting, even though he conceded, as he did in 1894, that the people of some races had smaller brains than those of the white race. He recognized, too, that "differences of structure must be accompanied by differences in function, physiological as well as psychological," and he continued, since we "found clear evidence of differences in structure between the races, so we must anticipate that differences in mental characteristics will be found." But, he insisted, such differences "have not been proved yet." And there he left his case: not a refutation of race, but as George Stocking has labeled it, an assertion of agnosticism.

One further general point needs to be noted about Boas's argument. His ideas, as you may have recognized, lack any change over time, any development. They remained substantially the same in 1911 as they were in 1887, when he first wrote about the equality of the mental development of Eskimos and Europeans. In short, from the outset of his career, as he himself often admitted, Boas was committed to an approach that denied race as an explanation for social differences. The sources of his ideas are several and too complex to be more than summarized here. Among them, though, must be mentioned his study in Europe, the writings of Theodor Waitz—the strongly environmentally inclined German anthropologist at the University of Marburg, whose work Boas repeatedly referred to in his published writings—and, finally, his family

background as a German Jewish liberal. All of these predisposed him to follow an ideology that asserted the equal potentiality of all people and called, consequently, for individual equality of opportunity. His commitment to a liberal ideology, I am convinced, caused him to place at the very beginning of his report on changing head shapes the rather dubious and certainly exceptional example of the convergence of the cephalic indices of the Sicilian and Russian Jewish boys. That was too striking an example of the power of environment to risk having it lost in the technicalities of the report.

That same ideology also manifests itself in Boas's early espousal of equal rights for blacks in American society. As early as 1906 he addressed the black students at Atlanta University, urging them not to believe those who asserted the students' inferiority. Look to the achievements of blacks in Africa, he advised them; there will be found the answers to the racists. "The past history of your race does not sustain their statement," he assured the students. Behind the scenes, Boas worked to advance the position of blacks, at one time writing to Andrew Carnegie for funds to set up an institute for African history and for the study of American blacks, at other times working to create organizations like the later NAACP that would work for civil rights for blacks. This commitment to blacks even overrode Boas's public admission in 1909 that he did "not believe that the negro is, in physical or mental makeup, the same as the European. The anatomical differences are so great that corresponding mental differences are plausible," he acknowledged.

The first point to be made, then, about Boas's concept of culture is that it grew out of a long-held commitment to a certain social outlook, not from disinterested, scientific inquiry into a vexed question. This is not to say, of course, that he fudged or manufactured his evidence—there is no sign of that—but rather that he was deeply interested in collecting whatever evidence he could find to support his preconceived view and was determined to call into question any evidence or argument that lent support to a racial explanation.

Let me turn, now, to some other meanings that emerge from an examination of Boas's conception of culture. While there can be little doubt that Boas showed a consistent and determined concern for the fate of black people in America, that same level of concern was not apparent in regard to Amerindians, despite his students' and his own deep professional involvement with them. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the question of the well-being of the aboriginal population was a highly visible and

political cause. The reservation system at the time was a travesty of humane treatment of dependent peoples, and the shocking decline of the Amerindian population was a topic of popular discussion. Yet Boas's public writings and his professional correspondence are almost devoid of expressions of concern or even interest in the status of Amerindians, particularly when compared with his many efforts aimed at improving the place of blacks in American society.

Some indications of Boas's attitude toward the future of Amerindians in the United States surface in his exchange of letters in 1903 with a correspondent named Natalie Curtis. Curtis asked him what the culture of a particular Amerindian tribe would be like if its members were completely isolated from white intrusion, or what she perceived as cultural contamination. The consummation of the idea did not appeal to Boas, who suggested instead that what the tribe in question required were teachers with better ethnological training. The purpose of that improved training, Boas made clear, would be to further the ultimate integration of the Amerindians into the general American population. "I firmly believe," he wrote Curtis, "that if nothing else could be accomplished," attention to the culture of the tribe would make "the transition from the old life to civilized life ... much easier, and that the young generation instead of being of very doubtful moral value, could become useful members of society, and would introduce into our community such parts of their own culture as were worth preserving.... Half bloods," he added, "are likely to merge into the white community," but full-blooded Indians "will always remain distinct from the white community," he predicted.

Significantly, Boas's future for blacks left no more place for racial or cultural survival than did his future for Amerindians. One of the reasons Boas opposed the segregation statutes then recently enacted in the Southern states, especially the prohibitions against interracial marriages, was that such policies would prevent racial mixing. "Broadly speaking," he wrote in 1909 to a professional colleague, "the question before us is ... whether it is better for us to keep an industrially and socially inferior large black population, or whether we should fare better by encouraging the gradual process of lightening up this large body of people by the influx of white blood." In the event that his correspondent did not grasp the implications of his remark, Boas rephrased his question: might it "be of advantage to accelerate the infusion of white blood among" the black population?

Some years later, in 1921, when he considered "The Problem of

the American Negro" for the *Yale Review*, he continued to see the elimination of the different appearance of blacks as something to strive for, especially if ending racial prejudice were the goal. What was required, he repeated, was the encouragement of interracial marriages, something that public policy in the Southern states outlawed. He identified interracial marriage as "the greatest hope for the immediate future.... In a race of octoroons, living among whites," he suggested, "the color question would probably disappear."

His solution of course looked forward, by definition, to the eventual disappearance of blacks, just as his answer to the uniqueness of the Amerindians was their ultimate integration or submergence into the general population. Boas, in short, was no cultural pluralist. Apparently he even contemplated the disappearance of his own ethnicity. He closed his article in the *Yale Review* with the observation that the Negro problem in the United States would not disappear "until the negro blood had been so much diluted that it will no longer be recognized just as anti-semitism will not disappear until the last vestige of the Jew as a Jew has disappeared."

If Boas was no cultural pluralist, neither was he a fully developed cultural relativist. His wish to see the integration of Amerindians and blacks into American society suggested that he recognized a hierarchy among cultures; some social groups should disappear into others. All cultures were not equal. To be accurate and fair, there is no question that Boas repeatedly and honestly stressed the necessity of recognizing the value of cultures other than his own, regardless of the depth of difference between them. Yet, as George Stocking has pointed out, Boas retained the idea that behind all cultures stood a common set of values which were especially evident in the culture of Europeans. Indeed, Boas's familiar defense of the equal potentiality of primitive peoples implied just such a hierarchy in that his usual point was that they, too, could achieve the highest culture, which he never doubted was that of Europe.

One final boundary to Boas's conception of culture needs to be examined: it is, that for all of his repeated emphases on culture, Boas never excluded heredity or biology from his conception of human nature. Contrary to what is sometimes said about his view of culture, he was no cultural determinist. He always insisted that heredity was highly influential in determining the lives of individuals. Even in his great paean to cultural explanation, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, Boas stressed the far-reaching influences of heredity

upon the individual human being. Granted the undoubted influence of environment, he wrote, it is nonetheless "readily seen that all the essential traits of man are due primarily to heredity. The descendants of the negro will always be a negro; the descendants of the whites, white; and we may go even considerably further, and may recognize that the essential detailed characters of a type will always be reproduced in the descendants, although they may be modified to a considerable extent by the influence of environment." He made the same point more explicitly in 1931 when he found a "very definite association" between biological form and physiological and psychological function. "The claim that only social and other environmental conditions determine the reactions of the individual disregards the most elementary observations, like differences in heart beat, basal metabolism, or gland development; and mental differences in their relation to extreme anatomical disturbances of the nervous system." In sum, he concluded, "there are organic reasons why individuals differ in their mental behavior."

Boas's emphasis upon the role of heredity in shaping the individual human being also makes clear that his conception of culture was not wholly environmentalistic. It never came close to the full-blown variety of environmentalism enunciated by the contemporary behavioral psychologist John Watson, who boasted that if given a dozen healthy infants, he would "guarantee to take anyone at random and train him" to be able to enter any occupation, regardless of "his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations and race of his ancestors."

The culture concept was Boas's way of accounting for behavioral differences among human groups, but a reliance upon cultural explanations did not preclude his recognizing a biological basis for behavior common to all human beings. That aspect of his thought emerged in the course of a criticism he made of eugenics in 1916. One of the admitted attractions of eugenics, he recognized, was its aim of "raising a better race," as he phrased it, "and to do away with increasing suffering by eliminating those who are by heredity destined to suffer and to cause suffering." Particularly attractive to many people, in Boas's view, was "the humanitarian idea of the conquest of suffering, and the ideal of raising human efficiency to heights never before reached." To that ideal his response was at once bold and uncompromising, and its premise smacked of biology: "I believe," he wrote, "that the human mind and body are so constituted that the attainment of these ends would lead to the destruction of society." The burden of his objection was that,

contrary to the ideal, suffering was at once desirable and necessary for human well-being. "The wish for the elimination of unnecessary suffering," he contended, "is divided by a narrow margin from the wish for the elimination of all suffering." Such a goal "may be a beautiful ideal," he admitted, but "it is unattainable." Almost like an Old Testament prophet, he went on to proclaim that the work of human beings will always require suffering and that "men must be willing to bear" that suffering. Besides, he continued, many of the world's great works of beauty "are the precious fruit of mental agony; and we should be poor indeed," he reminded his readers, "if the willingness of man to suffer should disappear." The worst thing of all, he warned, was that if this ideal were cultivated, "then that which was discomfort yesterday will be suffering today, and the elimination of discomforts will lead to an effeminacy that must be disastrous to the race."

What Boas meant by "effeminacy" was the tendency he saw in his own time for people to seek to reduce suffering in the name of efficiency. "We are clearly drifting toward the danger-line," he feared, "where the individual will no longer bear discomfort or pain for the sake of the continuance of the race, and where our emotional life is so strongly repressed by the desire for self-perfection—or by self-indulgence—that the coming generation is sacrificed to the selfishness of the living." He perceived in modern society a repetition of the tendency that "characterized the end of antiquity, when no children were found to take the place of the passing generations." To the extent that the "eugenic ideals of the elimination of suffering and self-development" are fostered, he warned, the sooner human beings will drift "towards the destruction of the race."

The irony of Boas's objections was that similar apocalyptic fears animated the eugenicists as well. For them the danger of national decline emanated from the reproductive reluctance of the educated classes; Boas, on the other hand, embraced all classes in his jeremiad.

Boas published his two works in 1911. Between 1911 and 1920 a number of social scientists, particularly anthropologists and sociologists, made clear their rejection of race as an explanation for human social differences. No one, however, made that rejection more pointedly nor more profoundly than Alfred L. Kroeber, by then professor of anthropology at the University of California.

Kroeber was as determined as Boas to substitute culture for race in the field of American social science, but he arrived at his position from a concern for clarity of theory and professional autonomy

rather than from the kind of ideological impetus that seems to have shaped Boas's thinking. In substance, Kroeber insisted that culture—he preferred to call it civilization or history—must be totally free from any connection with, or dependence upon biology. As we have seen, Boas, with his experience in physical anthropology, never thought this necessary. In a series of articles published between 1910 and 1917 in the professional journal *American Anthropologist*, Kroeber explained to his fellow social scientists why independence from biology was indispensable for understanding the meaning and use of culture. The culminating essay in the series, "The Superorganic," published in 1917, has since become the classic expression of that view.

Kroeber's determined effort to disengage biology from history began with Boas's familiar insistence on the equality of mental potentialities of societies. Kroeber was particularly insistent in asserting, in an essay in 1910, the universality of morality—what today we would refer to as "values"—among all human groupings; the designation of acts or objects as "good" or "bad" set men apart from animals. Morality, he argued, is "an inherent element of the human mind, it is psychologically unexplainable and finds its justification only in itself. As an integral constituent of man," he continued, "it is common to all races in identical or virtually identical form." This assertion of the equality of all social groups was an assumption with which he began, not something he intended or was prepared to prove. Boas had taken a more conservative position, saying only that those who believed in racially based differences among human groups had not proved their point. Kroeber baldly admitted that his own assertion of equality was unproved. "The absolute equality and identity of all human races and strains," he wrote in 1915, "has not been proved nor has it been disproved. It remains to be established, or to be limited" by continuing investigation.

Kroeber's disapproval of a biological or racial explanation for human differences, however, did not depend solely upon the absence of proof. His primary objection was that biology, by its nature as a science, was unable to explain the differences. At the heart of his objection stood the disproof of acquired characteristics. For a long time, social and natural scientists, including Darwin himself, had accepted the idea, popularized by the early nineteenth-century thinker Jean Baptiste Lamarck, that the behavior or habits of parents could be inherited (or "acquired") by their children. But the work of the German biologist August Weismann in

the late 1880s had shown the concept of acquired characteristics to be erroneous. Kroeber accepted Weismann's disproof of Lamarckianism and used it to explain why the achievements, or lack of achievements, of human societies could not be accounted for by biology or heredity. For, if the accomplishments of one generation could not be passed on to the next through inheritance, then advanced or so-called higher races could not claim biological sources for their superiority. By the same token, those races deemed inferior could not legitimately be charged with having inherited their inferiority as a consequence of the refusal of their ancestors to work sufficiently hard to improve themselves. Instead, according to Kroeber, each race was creating its own culture in the course of its existence. "The accomplishments of a group, relative to other groups," he wrote in 1917, "are little or not influenced by heredity."

The meaning of this point was clarified by Kroeber in the context of a criticism of Weismann. Like many biologists, Weismann had simply failed to recognize the implications that his own disproof of acquired characteristics held for the understanding of civilization or culture. Weismann was correct enough, Kroeber admitted, when he pointed out that Mozart's genius could not have flourished among the "Australian blackfellows." In Kroeber's mind, however, Weismann's reasons for reaching that conclusion betrayed a misunderstanding of the nature of culture. Weismann had attributed the absence of a Mozart to the lack of the necessary mental faculties among individual Australians. To Kroeber, what the Australians lacked was not an individual who was personally capable of being a Mozart, but a history or civilization capable of providing the social and intellectual circumstances to produce one. For, in Kroeber's view, with the proper social and historical background any population had the potential to produce a Mozart or a Darwin. The true source of genius, in short, was history or culture, not an especially talented individual. As will become clear below, Kroeber's conception of the individual in civilization or culture was exceptional in yet another way.

Basically, Kroeber was moving toward a recognition that there were two kinds of evolution—not just one, as so many biologists and social scientists, influenced by Darwin's evolutionary scheme, assumed. Biological evolution, he said again and again, had nothing to do with social evolution. In fact, he wrote, "social evolution is without antecedents in the beginnings of organic evolution." Through the agency of language, human beings had separated

themselves from animals at an unspecified and probably unknown time in the remote past. Social evolution, Kroeber pointed out, was truly Lamarckian, in that "use modification"—a basic Lamarckian principle—"is permanent." Kroeber observed, however, that this is not the case in biological evolution. In this "non-organic process of evolution," which he called "civilization or human accomplishment ... , transmittal of the acquired exists," thanks to language.

Kroeber was advocating far more than a mere change in assumptions, as Boas had done. He advocated nothing less than a new mode of explanation for human social behavior. "Civilization and heredity are two things that operate in separate ways," he insisted. "Therefore any outright substitution of one for the other in the explanation of human group phenomenon" must be rejected. There are no "laws in history similar to the laws of physico-chemical science," he pointed out. All the so-called laws of civilization or history "are at most tendencies, which, however determinable, are not permanent quantitative expressions, as are the laws of physics." History, he continued, deals "with conditions ... not with causes." Nor is history like biology. The relation between the phenomena of history is sequential, not causal in the way "the principles of mechanical causality, emanating from the underlying biological sciences, are applicable to individual and collective psychology." History, in sum, has no laws of behavior: it consists merely of behavior that shapes the behavior that follows.

Even a nonsocial circumstance like geography, Kroeber contended, does not shape history, contrary to what some students of geography had claimed. Geography has no causal power. On the contrary, civilization or human activity adjusts to geography and may even alter it. As a concrete explication, Kroeber instanced farming. "Agriculture," he pointed out, "presupposes a climate able to sustain agriculture and modifies itself according to climatic conditions. It is not caused by climate"; rather, human beings reshape their agriculture to fit the climate.

As one might anticipate from the foregoing, Kroeber specifically denied that any Darwinian influences, such as natural selection, affected culture. Civilization introduced a factor, he insisted, "practically or entirely lacking in the existence of animals and plants"; consequently, it is untouched by Darwinian forces like natural selection. "Prehistoric archeology shows with certainty," he asserted, "that civilization has changed profoundly without accompanying material alterations in the human organism." Animals adjust to environmental change by physical alterations brought

about by natural selection, but human beings change through culture or history. The direction and movement of history, Kroeber asserted, "involves the absolute conditioning of historical events by other historical events." Since the sources of animal and human behavior differ in kind, it follows, according to Kroeber, that "the dawn of the social ... is not a link in any chain, not a step in a path, but a leap to another plane." That remark of Kroeber's was probably the first assertion by any social scientist of the complete disparity of biological and cultural evolution.

The superorganic, or culture, in Kroeber's view, was not only distinct and untouched by biology it was also separate from individual human beings as well: As members of a group or social system, individuals had certainly created the superorganic, but as individuals they did not exert influence over it nor was an individual as an individual affected by it. In identifying this dichotomy between culture and the individual, Kroeber was fully aware that his conception of history's relation to an individual differed sharply from that of his contemporaries. He described their conception as resting on what he called the "illogical assumption that because without individuals civilization could not exist, civilization therefore is only a sum total of the psychic operation of a mass of individuals." His own view was that "a thousand individuals do not make a society. They are the potential basis of a society; but they do not themselves cause it." It is true, he conceded, that mental activity, like motor behavior, depends upon the organic in human beings and therefore is derived from heredity or biology. But the *product* of that organically based "mental activity," he argued, has little to do with "civilization in that civilization is not mental action but a body or stream of products of mental exercise.... Mentality relates to the individual. The social or cultural, on the other hand, is in its essence non-individual. Civilization as such," he concluded, "begins only where the individual ends." Or put another way, culture is constructed from the social interaction of individuals, contemporaneous and across generations, and integrated by language. Social groups, whether they are what we call races or what those in Kroeber's time called racial types, are not biological units at all, but socially integrated aggregates whose products are the sole result of human perception and experience. Biology or heredity played no direct part in a social group's achievements and therefore cannot be a part of the explanation of a social group's actions.

On the other hand, Kroeber held that the individual was heavily influenced by biology and heredity, even beyond that degree which

Boas had recognized. Kroeber, for instance, accepted eugenicist Francis Galton's conclusions regarding the inheritance of intelligence as set forth in Galton's book, *Hereditary Genius*, in 1869. Galton's conclusion that mental traits were just as likely to be inherited as were physical traits, Kroeber pronounced "reasonable as well as convincing." An irascible temper and musical aptitude, he thought, were probably as inheritable as blue eyes and red hair. There is no reason to rule out the real possibility, he concluded, "that characters of mind are subject to heredity much like traits of the body." Kroeber similarly accepted the implications of a report by the experimental psychologist Edward Thorndike that the future of an individual's life was "settled when the parental germ cells unite, and [is] already long closed when the child emerges from the womb." Or, as he rephrased the point, "nothing is farther from the path of a just prosecution of the understanding of history" than to deny "differences of degree of the faculties of individual men." In short, Kroeber, like Boas, was no believer in the infinite or even equal potentialities of the individual human being.

Furthermore, Kroeber departed profoundly from both Galton and Thorndike, both of whom were committed eugenicists, with respect to their belief that altering the heredity of individuals through eugenics could improve society. Heredity might explain almost all the differences between the accomplishments of one individual as against another, Kroeber conceded, but "the accomplishments of a group, relative to other groups," he maintained, "are little or not influenced by heredity because sufficiently large groups average much alike in organic makeup." And that was why civilization or history was not shaped by great men or women; rather, they were products of the society, as in his example of Mozart. "The difference between the accomplishments of one group of men and those of another group is therefore of another order from the differences between the faculties of one person and another," he emphasized. "It is through this distinction that one of the essential qualities of the nature of the social is to be found," he concluded. The superorganic, or culture, was above and beyond any individual.

By the same reasoning, Kroeber insisted that the individual was uninfluenced by culture. "Because culture rests on the specific [individual] human faculty," he reiterated, "it does not follow that this faculty ... is of social determination." Social circumstances, he conceded, may help shape individual opportunities either positively or negatively, but that "does not prove that the individual is wholly

the product of circumstances outside himself, any more than the opposite is true that a civilization is only the sum total of the products of a group of organically shaped minds." To believe that the individual is "the result of his moulding by the society that encompasses him," Kroeber warned, is an assumption, an extreme one at that, and one quite at variance with observation. After all, human beings, like animals, are organic and to that extent are beyond cultural influence. In short, Kroeber, like Boas, was not an environmental determinist like psychologist John Watson or his fellow anthropologist Leslie White, who followed Watson's lead some years later. Modern conceptions of socialization that perceive individuals as products of their culture alone would not have been any more acceptable to Kroeber than to Boas.

In light of Kroeber's determined effort to separate social science from biology, it is plausible to infer that biologists' intellectual imperialism was the threat that stimulated his concern. But such was apparently not the case. Writing many years later, Kroeber explained that no threat and therefore no stimulus came from the biologists. The threat, rather, emanated from fellow social scientists like Lester Frank Ward and Herbert Spencer, who carelessly combined culture and biology. "What the essay ["The Superorganic"] really protests," Kroeber remarked in 1952, "is the blind and bland shuttling back and forth between the equivocal 'race' and an equivocal 'civilization.'"

The larger motives behind Kroeber's enunciation of the concept of culture seem clear enough. They were simply to secure professional independence along with clearer understanding of what social scientists were actually doing. His aim was to arrive at a sharply focused definition of the nature and methods of the social sciences, one that would set the study of human life apart from science in general and biology in particular. Therefore, he called upon social scientists "to press this great truth at every opening, and every turn, to brand each error and confusion as fast as it raises its head, to stigmatize all half-hearted evasion, to meet argument with argument, and, if necessary, assumption and assertion with counter assumption and assertion."

By the time Kroeber had written that call to arms in 1916, the concept of culture that Boas had pressed upon social scientists over the previous twenty years had already begun to transform American social science theory. The transformation can actually be followed in a particular instance, the case of Carl Kelsey, a professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Within four years

Kelsey's published writings had shifted from a clear racist outlook to one in which social environment became the preferred means of accounting for differences between whites and blacks. Among the sources which he himself identified for his new view were the writings of Franz Boas. Howard Odum, also destined to become a nationally known sociologist, passed through a similar transformation between 1910 and 1913, again thanks to his exposure to the work of Franz Boas.¹

The remarks in 1918 of Ellsworth Faris, a leading sociologist of the time, not only reflect the triumph of the culture concept among sociologists, but simultaneously offer some insight into how the concept achieved that broad acceptance. Speaking for his professional colleagues, Faris pointed out that the works of Boas and others had demonstrated that "instead of the concept of different ... degrees of mentality, we find it easier to think of the human mind as being, in its capacity, about the same everywhere."

At the same time, however, Faris acknowledged the tentative, even unproved character of that equality. As Kroeber had done earlier, Faris reminded his audience that the whole concept "is only a hypothesis. It has not been proved." It is possible, Faris observed, that behavioral differences between blacks and whites might still be explained by differences in the sizes of the brain. Only insufficient or inadequate tests and measurements have been made so far, he pointed out. He urged the mounting of an expedition composed of trained professionals to travel to Africa to carry out more elaborate and reliable measurements. If that were done, he concluded, "it would be possible to write with more certainty concerning the mind of primitive man."

In Faris's doubts are exposed once again the ideological roots of

¹ For an example of Kelsey's early racist view see his book, *The Negro Farmer* (Chicago: Jennings and Pye, 1903), pp. 5–7; for his shift in outlook see his comment on a paper on "Social Darwinism," *American Journal of Sociology* 12 (March 1907): 711; also his article, "Influence of Heredity and Environment upon Race Improvement," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 34 (July 1909): 3–8, and his review of Boas's *Mind of Primitive Man* in the *Annals* 46 (March 1913): 203–4, in the course of which he pronounced Boas's view to be the "prevailing belief" among social scientists. Odum's switch in outlook can be followed in his *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1910), pp. 46–47 and his article, "Negro Children in the Public Schools of Philadelphia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 49 (September 1913): 200–206. Like Kelsey, Odum cited Boas's work in support of his new environmentalist position.

the triumph of the Boasian conception of culture over biology. Boas's *Mind of Primitive Man* had in fact been based on virtually no experimental evidence and, of course, Faris's plan for a more rigorous experimental program was never carried out. Despite the lack of hard evidence, the antiracist interpretation continued to win converts among American social scientists. A racial explanation for human differences was simply unacceptable; culture could account for all of them. "We do not need to look for the working, in the life of 'nature peoples' of factors essentially different from those which we find at work in our social life," concluded the prominent sociologist Charles Ellwood in 1918. "Habit and environment, accident and imitation, instinct and reasoning, invention and intercommunication," he noted, "have played qualitatively, if not quantitatively, the same part in the culture of all peoples."

As Ellwood's words and those of Faris, quoted earlier, make clear, by 1920 the concept of culture had indeed supplanted race in the thinking of most sociologists and anthropologists. That it was so was largely because that concept closely fitted the ideological outlook of the reform-minded professionals to whom it was directed. Nonetheless, that transformation in thought required a catalyst and a rationale; both were effectively supplied by Franz Boas and Alfred L. Kroeber.

**The Dimensions of Franz Boas's Thought on
Environment and Culture:
A Response to Carl N. Degler**

Marshall Hyatt

I concur with the clear delineation Professor Degler has made between Boas's use of culture and biology. Boas certainly believed that biology, specifically hereditary factors, shaped each individual human being. He did not argue the primacy of the environment in these instances. However, in Boas's mind, culture took over as the major factor to consider when the behavior of a people was concerned.

As early as 1894 Boas made such an argument in his vice-presidential address before the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He argued that race did not determine a people's intelligence. Each race possessed a complex spectrum of differing mental abilities. Accordingly, no generalizations applied to all individuals within any racial group. From this address forward until his death in 1942, Boas staunchly maintained that all races had equal potential and that if exposed to similar particular historical circumstances, all would produce and create similar levels of culture. Historical particularism made cultures relative.

Having said this, it must be added by way of caveat, as Professor Degler suggested, that Boas himself was something of a cultural, or ethnic, chauvinist. He never deviated from his belief that European culture set the standard for others to emulate. Nowhere in his writing did he contradict this feeling. Although he frequently contended that the concept of a pure race had been rendered meaningless by the intensity of migration that characterized world history, he always looked to Europe as representing the highest form of cultural achievement. His activities, as Professor Degler made clear, reinforced this affinity in many ways. The establishment of a German Cultural Society and his frequent raids on German universities in the hopes of luring German professors to America are clear evidence of the esteem in which he held Old World culture.

Further, Boas's love of Beethoven and the enjoyment he experienced playing those compositions on his piano in the evening at home reflected the intense personal nature of his ties to the land of his birth and to the ascendancy of its culture in his mind. Indeed, it was with great sorrow that he made the decision to cease playing Beethoven's works when World War II made it impossible to remember Germany fondly. Despite this obvious favoritism toward European culture, it is evident that Boas thought all other cultures could perform on a similar level if their historical experiences were the same.

I turn now specifically to Boas's motivations for denying heredity and race as explanations of a people's behavior. As Professor Degler has stated, the works of Theodor Waitz were most influential during Boas's university years, as was his own background as a German Jewish liberal. Of equal, or perhaps greater weight, was his personal experience with persecution, specifically the encounters with anti-Semitism that initially led him to America.

We can analyze Boas's defense of Afro-American equality for an understanding of what he thought and the foundation of his epistemology. To begin, it cannot be overemphasized that Boas demanded scientific rigor and exactness as part of his research methodology. He infused these qualities into the discipline of anthropology, which he led toward professionalization as an academic enterprise in America. At the same time, Boas held strong liberal convictions which rejected racial stereotyping and the ranking of races on a scale of evolution. Accordingly, he sought evidence to argue against such prejudicial thinking, but never doctored his findings because of his commitment to accuracy and scientific purity.

For example, in an article titled "The Anthropological Position of the Negro" (*Van Norden's*, May 1907) in which he tried to popularize his ideas on equipotentiality, he acknowledged that a "somewhat larger size of the white brain" could translate into "a slightly greater ability" in white intelligence. He cautioned, however, that no scientist had actually proved that brain size had any relation to mental capacity. He then shifted his argument to social conditions, focusing on the debilitating effects of slavery and its legacy to account for Afro-American cultural retardation.

Given his commitment to scientific accuracy, his liberalism on social issues, and his own abhorrent experiences with anti-Semitism, the issue of Afro-American persecution became a perfect target for him. It meshed neatly with his belief in equipotentiality, stressed

environment over race as a determinant of behavior, allowed him to blend his research with social concerns, and provided a means of attacking bigotry. And yet, because he crusaded publicly against antiblack invective rather than anti-Semitism, he was able to maintain the facade of a detached, objective scientist.

Boas arrived at his defense of blacks in large measure because he had undergone similar discrimination. Feeling that a scientific investigation of racial prejudice centered on Jews would leave him vulnerable to the charge of subjectivity, he used blacks as a substitute. When he challenged pseudoscientific theories alleging black inferiority, he was reacting to his own personal experience. By focusing on blacks he could lay siege to the underpinnings of all forms of racist thought and advance his concepts of culture and environment and still maintain scientific objectivity. In this way he could change the thinking of WASP America about both blacks and Jews.

The connection between black persecution and anti-Semitism, for Boas, was revealed in his 1921 article "The Problem of the American Negro," to which Professor Degler has made reference. Until all vestiges of the black and the Jew as distinct types had disappeared, prejudice would remain. Beyond the obvious pessimism reflected in this statement was Boas's clear linking of black and Jewish issues.

There remains the provocative question Professor Degler has posed, why dwell on blacks and not Amerindians, whom Boas studied intensively? Although I have not investigated the literature on Indian affairs extensively, I would conjecture that Boas chose Afro-Americans because of the extent to which racists had misused science in arguing for their inferiority. Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, Nathanael Southgate Shaler, and Robert Bennet Bean, to name just a few, all pointed a finger of condemnation at Afro-Americans. The fact that these men misused science to prove inferiority tainted them for Boas. The attacks went against his scrupulous attention to scientific research, his liberal values, and his own past history.

Beyond this, America in the early twentieth century appeared obsessed with the "black question." Popular film, most notoriously *The Birth of a Nation*, depicted blacks in pernicious, stereotypical ways. Lynching, race riots, and Ku Klux Klan atrocities were rampant. Similar to other progressive Jewish reformers, such as Eric Reuter, Joel Spingarn, and Julius Rosenwald, Boas no doubt picked the Afro-American situation not only for its value in masking his

own concerns about anti-Semitism but also because of the heightened, emotionally charged nature of black-white dialogue in the United States.

In conclusion, I agree totally with the notion that Boas, and later Alfred Kroeber, provided the prime ammunition for a new view of human behavior in which race lost its primacy and culture began to dominate. This was a critical first step that helped pave the way for the ascendancy of civil rights as a national issue in the 1930s; by then, scientific justifications for legal restrictions on a supposedly inferior people had been swept away.

Boas profoundly affected American thought in this area, making it clear, as Professor Degler has indicated, that by the 1930s no serious thinker on American race relations believed that either race or heredity accounted for a people's behavior. With this new thinking as background, social scientists could then move logically to address the differences between races from an environmental perspective. Thus, the impact of Boasian thought left a distinct imprint on the future debate over American race relations. Both Gunnar Myrdal's 1942 study, *An American Dilemma*, and the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* took as a given the primacy of environment and historical particularism and stressed the idea of equipotentiality of the races. Their enormous debt to Boas was unmistakable.

Rereading Boas: A Woman Historian's Response to Carl N. Degler

Barbara Duden

I was intrigued by the invitation to comment on Professor Degler's paper. When it arrived, I was teaching a course on "The Social Construction of Woman as a Scientific Fact." Far from being a distraction from my own studies, as I initially feared, Professor Degler's paper fit nicely into this course. My subject dealt with "science in women" rather than with "women in science." In this course I expected my students to familiarize themselves with the ideas of Ludwik Fleck, the Polish Jewish microbiologist whose 1935 book treated the social etiology and evolution of syphilis as a scientific fact. My students and I analyzed Fleck's concept of a historically specific thought pattern (*Denkstil*) and used his ideas in order to understand how a thought pattern emerges from scientific terminology and is adopted in popular discourse. At the same time, we applied Fleck's ideas to explore recent assertions about "woman." Unlike Fleck, whose subject was the historical creation of syphilis, mine was the historical creation of modern "woman." We followed the steps by which concepts, shaped within the discourse of biologists, and percepts, defined within the clinical laboratory, have been transported via self-palpation and ultrasound visualization into the actual experience of and by women. We considered how conceptual entities created by specialists are first transferred into popular science and then into body percepts in various historical epochs.

In this context, Professor Degler's paper came as a welcome contribution. He calls attention to one particular twentieth-century episode in which a new scientific concept was turned into a popular verity and then into the substance of experience. His story begins at the end of the nineteenth century, when biological concepts shaped by physiognomy, craniology, and evolutionary theory acquired a new kind of respectability under the name of anthropometry. At that time, application of anthropometry gave the semblance of

scientific reputation to "race." Degler tells us about Boas's efforts to counteract this trend to explain social phenomena with biological concepts.

Degler also recalls Boas's intellectual development. The latter was first interested in the law-giving functions of physics and then studied geography and linguistics. Finally, he became historian-cosmographer, describing and explaining social phenomena in ways that found wide popular acceptance. It is fascinating to observe how Boas created the new conceptual reality of *culture*. He took an ordinary English word, for which G. Murray's *Oxford English Dictionary* knew only meanings such as worship, refinement, and the "artificial development of microscopic organisms," and used it as a technical term in a new academic discourse. He was careful not to cripple the term by pedantic definition. Instead, he used it freely, claiming that anthropology was a full-blown independent science. Only toward the end of Boas's life did his students turn the ordinary word "culture," to which Boas had given fresh emphasis and connotations, into a new term, one that subsequently became a defined and defining tool of anthropology.

We often forget how recent it is that learned discourse started using the term "culture." When I was in my early twenties and studying at the University of Vienna, I recall that the only way to refer to this notion was to say "Kultur im Sinne des amerikanischen Wortes *culture*"—*Kultur* as in the meaning of the American word "culture." Over the past twenty years I have seen how my grandfather's "Kultur des kultivierten Menschen" has been "unmasked" as an ideological and repressive construct; how culture, written with a small c in English, has come to be written as a German noun with an uppercase K.

Degler has raised three questions about Boas and Kroeber. What was their concept of culture? Why did they develop this concept? Why did other social scientists accept it? These questions lead to others. How should we explain the triumphal reception that culture received in the interwar period? How should we interpret the fact that at the time the Berlin Wall came of age in the 1970s, *Kultur* became one of the pillars of my generation's mind-set?

The social historian cannot avoid speculating on the factors which created a hospitable climate for culture in the United States. The new concepts supported the transformation of a multiracial republic into a self-consciously multicultural society designed to serve as a model to others. Trust in cultural plasticity supported the belief of American educators that the school system could support the ideal

of the United States as a melting pot. The new concept also supported sociological jurisprudence: law became a means of social engineering and as such a social problem solver. With their culture, Boas, Kroeber, and their students introduced a construct that both echoed and supported social manipulation by educators, politicians, and judicial activists.

In Germany, culture came later: not, as in the United States, during my grandparents' time, but during my parents'. It was imported through the translation of textbooks and was slowly woven into the stuff (*den Gesprächsstoff*) of political and professional discourse. In the 1950s, culture in Germany won the war against race. When I began my university studies, racial explanations were taboo, along with all that smacked of physical anthropology. But we were confused. Small *c* culture was not yet an established concept that could offer us new certainties.

Kulturgeschichte has enjoyed a venerable past in Germany. This notion goes back to Herder's demand that the historian write "Menschengeschichte für Menschen," because so often the tone of history is muted by the noise of battles, heroic deeds, and state actions. With Christian Adelung's *Versuch einer Geschichte der Kultur des menschlichen Geschlechts* (Leipzig, 1782), the historian's subject came to be defined as the social and spiritual life of a people. Well before *l'histoire des mentalités* was born, Jacob Burckhardt defined *Kulturgeschichte* as "the history of the mentalities and perceptions that define the life of a people." (Geschichte der Denkweisen and Anschauungen ..., die das Leben eines Volkes bestimmen). The academic milieu in which I took my first steps into historiography was still profoundly influenced by the early twentieth-century neo-Kantian criticism of Auguste Comte, which made culture (equated to civilization) the object of a new kind of historical science in search of laws and causalities. The volumes of the *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* from 1856 to 1903 and those for the *Zeitschrift für deutsche Kulturgeschichte* in the 1950s and 1960s mirrored this background.

As a result, the new cultural anthropology was for many of us an upsetting discovery. We flocked to the few teachers who were not only importing a fad but also re-creating history by recognizing a past culture as its subject. I learned from Thomas Nipperdey to perceive festivities, clubs, political marches, and forms of sociability as historically relevant phenomena. I wrote my paper on Rahel Varnhagen and the Berlin salons. Few professors of history would have accepted this topic as relevant to historical research at that

time. To study eighteenth-century Weimar culture, we had to read an Englishman, Walter H. Bruford, or we had to go back to Karl Lamprecht, whom we discovered and unearthed as the representative of the "other," "better" tradition of German historiography.

When I now reflect on the mid-sixties, three handicaps under which my generation had to labor become clear. First, the views of the school of the *Annales* were then still beyond the horizon for most of us. Second, our teachers did not encourage us to delve into the tradition of German *Kultursoziologie* represented by Dilthey or Frobenius, Scheler or Dempf—even though Alfred Weber and Karl Mannheim were treated with respect. Finally, true courage was required to quote from authors such as Gehlen, Portmann, Plessner, and Buytendijk, who together had created a philosophical bio-anthropology. This philosophical bio-anthropology has only recently come to be recognized as a strong complement to the social sciences' fixation on culture. Therefore, "US-type culture" was often accepted by default in my generation. Without Degler I might never have noticed how an idea, forged by a Jewish emigrant from a tiny Protestant town nestled by the quiet Weser, had traveled via New York back to the originator's native country.

During the years when American cultural and linguistic anthropology came to Germany, I was mainly concerned with women's history. When, during the sixties, one wrote about German women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one's models were American historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. Few of us knew about the anthropologically and ethnologically oriented breakthroughs in French historiography. By the end of the seventies, a new interpretative principle was given to us by Gerda Lerner: "Gender as a social category." Women's studies re-created woman as a *cultural* fact. Gisela Bock exposed the historiographic myth of a pronatalist Nazi population policy. She uncovered the sexist nature of racism that appears in enforced sterilization programs. Women historians tried to rescue women from being "natural" and "biological" beings by placing women and their bodies within an historical context. For women's history, the American concept of culture became an essential tool, a tool with which to claim as historical what German historiography had viewed as neither historical nor relevant for history.

As early as 1911, Boas had formulated the basic idea that "heretofore we had the right to assume that human types are stable, [but] all the evidence is now in favor of a greater plasticity of human types, and permanence of types in new surroundings appears rather

as an exception than as a rule."¹ Boas was addressing the "de-biologization" of race; today, women historians must be concerned with the de-biologization of gender. And, notwithstanding the recognition of the magnitude of the task, much of the actual historical work still needs to be done.

After several years of feminist efforts to de-biologize women, I now see a haunting paradox. In an attempt to write women's cultural history in a way relevant to modern women, contemporary scholarship records that medieval women began to menstruate or entered their menopause. In the 1980s, the writings of Hippocrates are scrutinized for his teachings on reproduction or sexuality—these being biological terms which in that epoch lack a meaningful referent but are nevertheless now retrospectively applied. Fasting saints are diagnosed as suffering from anorexia. Cultural historians, feminist or not, have begun to colonize the past with biological certainties that we hold about our own, late twentieth-century bodies. This naturalization of "woman" as a transhistorical type seems to be another epoch-specific way of explaining social phenomena by recourse to facts constructed by biology. These "facts" cannot but remind me of the cephalic index which Boas used and then challenged by looking at 18,000 immigrant schoolchildren during their stay on Ellis Island in 1910–13.

For a historian concerned with the scientific construction of facts that are then experienced by women as their own bodies, Professor Degler's invitation to reread Boas is worthwhile and rewarding.

¹ Boas, *Changes in the Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1911), quoted in George Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 178.