

# Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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*It has been argued that Franz Boas contributed little to the emergence of the culture concept in anthropology and in fact hindered its growth. In the context of an earlier re-evaluation of the role of E. B. Tylor, it is argued here that in the work of Boas the concept was in fact provided with much of the basis of its modern anthropological meaning. In developing his argument against racial mental differences, Boas proceeded by showing that the behavior of all men, regardless of race or cultural stage, was determined by a traditional body of habitual behavior patterns passed on through what we would now call enculturative processes and buttressed by ethically tainted secondary rationalizations. The behavioral significance of the older humanist-evolutionist idea of culture was thus inverted, and the basis laid for the notion of culture as a primary determinant of behavior.*

The fundamental concepts . . . in any of the disciplines of science are always left indeterminate at first and are only explained to begin with by reference to the realm of phenomena from which they were derived; it is only by means of a progressive analysis of the material of observation that they can be made clear and can find a significant and consistent meaning.

Sigmund Freud (as quoted by  
Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:42)

. . . this attachment to inherited names appears much stronger as soon as we consider realities of a less material order. That is because the transformations in such cases almost always take place too slowly to be perceptible to the very men affected by them. They feel no need to change the label, because the change of content escapes them.

Marc Bloch (1961:159)

**F**REUD wrote of the nomenclature of science; Bloch, of the nomenclature of history. Anthropology partakes of both science and history, and at various points in time anthropologists have been acutely conscious of the hybrid character of their discipline. But in a culture where science has increasingly provided the primary measure of intellectual endeavor, it is hardly surprising that on the whole they have been inclined to emphasize the scientific character of their study. When two of the most eminent—and historically oriented—anthropologists set about writing a review of the culture concept in anthropology, they found their definitional point of departure not in Bloch but in Freud.

It was in this context that Kroeber and Kluckhohn suggested that in the very process of definition itself one might see “in microcosm the essence of the cultural process: the imposition of a conventional form upon the flux of experience” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:41). One might also note that the language of their microcosm would seem to derive at least as much from the modern philosophy of science as from the anthropological study of culture. But for present purposes I would prefer to focus on an ambiguity of meaning that can serve to illuminate both the anthropological idea of culture and the historical process of its definition. Exactly how is “conventional form” imposed “upon the flux of experience” in the definition of concepts in the social

sciences? Is it imposed by the creative scientist, whose conceptual innovation is subsequently clarified by "progressive analysis of the material of observation"? Or can it also be imposed by the "inherited names" that condition our ordering of the flux of experience? The latter interpretation would of course take us from Freud to Bloch, who argued that history (as "a science of humanity") received its vocabulary "already worn out and deformed by long usage" from men who "gave names to their actions, their beliefs, and the various aspects of their social life without waiting until they became objects of disinterested research" (Bloch 1961:158).

What is involved here is not simply a matter of epigraphical taste. The denial of parentage has serious implications, especially for a hybrid offspring. For one thing, these alternative interpretations of the process of definition reflect alternatives of usage of the term "culture": the humanist and the anthropological. Kroeber and Kluckhohn were of course quite conscious of this duality. Indeed, they were at some pains to distinguish between the two meanings. Unlike humanist "culture," which was "absolutistic" and knew perfection, anthropological "culture" was "relativistic." Instead of beginning with "an inherited hierarchy of values," it assumed "that every society through its culture seeks and in some measure finds values . . ." (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:32). Other antitheses may convey further aspects of the distinction: anthropological "culture" is homeostatic, while humanist "culture" is progressive; it is plural, while humanist "culture" is singular. Traditional humanist usage distinguishes between degrees of "culture"; for the anthropologist, all men are equally "cultured."

Stretching the uses of analogy just a bit in order to get back to our two alternative processes of definition, I might suggest that humanist "culture" would emphasize the creating, innovating scientist; anthropological "culture," the "inherited names" that condition the ordering of experience. Like most of the antitheses posed above, this one breaks down partially when probed. Historically, humanist "culture" has not been quite so undifferentiated as I will speak of it in this article, and anthropologists, especially in recent years, have also been concerned with cumulative human creativity. Nevertheless, clearly the heritage of names more than the creative individual conditions one leading anthropologist's suggestion that the essence of the culture idea is that "learned behavior, socially transmitted and cumulative in time, is paramount as a determinant of human behavior" (Hallowell 1960:316).

In writing their own history, however, anthropologists have not always maintained a characteristically anthropological posture (Stocking 1964, 1965a). For instance, the notion of definition as the work of the creative innovator clearly governs Kroeber's and Kluckhohn's summary of the development of the culture concept in anthropology. According to this view, the English anthropologist E. B. Tylor, in two volumes called *Primitive Culture* published in 1871, "deliberately" established a science "by defining its subject matter," although strangely enough, the work of clarifying the culture concept through the "progressive analysis of the material of observation" was

delayed for more than a generation. Here the notion of "inherited names" enters the definitional process chiefly as a partial explanation for this cultural lag and as an occasion for pique at the failure of dictionaries for over half a century to acknowledge anything but the humanist usage (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:9, 147, 150-151).

Going behind the words of Tylor's famous definition, I have attempted at some length in an earlier article in this journal (1963a) to show that his actual usage of the word "culture" was singular and hierarchical if not absolutistic, and that it lacked any real anthropological sense of the weight of "inherited names" in the determination of behavior. Tylor recognized the existence of custom and tradition, but "culture" was most definitely not their synonym. It was identified rather with those creative rational capacities that would liberate mankind from Walter Bagehot's "cake of custom" and enable it to move consciously up the road of "verifiable progress." Far from defining the modern anthropological concept, Tylor took the contemporary humanist idea of culture and fitted it into the framework of progressive social evolutionism. While he argued that European culture was a natural evolutionary growth out of primitive germs, he nevertheless still saw human groups in hierarchical terms, differing widely in the degree to which they were "cultured."

In this context, the late 19th-century "lag" in the further clarification of the concept is less an enigma than an anachronism. Kroeber and Kluckhohn could find no instance of definition after Tylor's until 1903 (1952:149). But if the modern anthropological idea had not yet emerged, then the problem of delay in its elaboration evaporates. Looking beyond Tylor to others who might on other grounds be expected to have contributed to that elaboration, one finds at least presumptive evidence for the general validity of this view. It is in the German intellectual tradition that the roots of the culture idea, in both its humanist and anthropological forms, are most inextricably entangled. But it is in fact in German anthropology that one finds the distinction between *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*—that is, between peoples who have culture and peoples who do not. And indeed, it was Germany's leading anthropologist, Rudolf Virchow, who characterized Bismarck's struggle with the Catholic Church as a *Kulturkampf*—a fight for culture—which for Virchow meant a fight for liberal, rational principles against the dead weight of medieval traditionalism, obscurantism, and authoritarianism (Ackerknecht 1953:184-186; cf. Hartog 1938). The situation in late 19th-century anthropology elsewhere is satisfactorily summarized by Kroeber and Kluckhohn themselves:

the whole orientation of the evolutionary school, whose productivity began just ten years before 1871 and of which Tylor himself formed part, . . . was toward origins, stages, progress and survivals, and spontaneous or rational operations of the human mind. . . . In short, the assumptions as well as the findings of the "evolutionists" were schematic and . . . the men remained uninterested in culture as a concept [1952:151].

Although further investigation is undoubtedly called for, on the basis of evidence already available I would suggest that the argument from Tylor can be generalized. Prior to about 1900, "culture" both in the German and in the

Anglo-American tradition still had not acquired its characteristic modern anthropological connotations. Whether in the humanist or the evolutionist sense, it was associated with the progressive accumulation of the characteristic manifestations of human creativity: art, science, knowledge, refinement—those things that freed man from control by nature, by environment, by reflex, by instinct, by habit, or by custom. “Culture” was not associated with tradition—as weighted, as limiting, as homeostatic, as a determinant of behavior. In general, these connotations were given to the ideas of custom, instinct, or temperament, and they were often associated with a lower evolutionary status, frequently argued in racial terms. The archetypal representative of this point of view was, of course, Herbert Spencer, from whom any number of quotations could be culled portraying the savage (more likely than not, black) as improvident, impulsive, incapable of abstraction, governed by fixity of habit merging imperceptibly over time into racial instinct (Spencer 1870:439–440; 1895–97; Stocking 1960).

Against this background, we may now turn to Franz Boas. Preoccupied as they were with an imaginary cultural lag, Kroeber and Kluckhohn made Boas one of its causes: “directly he contributed little to Tylor’s attempt to isolate and clarify the concept of culture”; “indirectly he hindered its progress by diverting attention to other problems” (1952:151). It is the thesis of this article that far from hindering the development of the anthropological concept, Boas played a crucial role in its emergence. This role has been obscured for various reasons, among them perhaps the fact that Boas did not formulate a definition of culture for publication until 1930 (1952:151). But the more basic reasons have to do with Boas’ status as a transitional figure in the development of a concept that only gradually emerged from the conditioning of its “inherited name,” and with the attempt to impose on this transition the developmental model of the epigraph from Freud.

Actually, Boas was not completely unconscious of the change in context of this “inherited name.” In fact, his apparent awareness that the word “culture” had changed its meaning offers some of the more interesting evidence for his transitional status. A close reading of Boas’ 1894 essay on “Human Faculty as Determined by Race” and those portions of *The Mind of Primitive Man* deriving from it reveals several interesting changes in the use of the terms “culture” and “civilization”:

1894—“Was the *culture* attained by the ancient civilized people of such character as to allow us to claim for them a genius superior to that of any other race?”

1911—“Was the *civilization* attained by these ancient people of such character . . . ” etc.

1894—“ . . . each people which participated in the ancient civilization added to the *culture* of others.”

1911—“ . . . each people which participated in the ancient development contributed its share to the general progress.”

1894—" . . . but there can be no doubt that the general status of their *culture* was nearly equally high."

1911—" . . . but there can be no doubt that the general status of their *civilization* was nearly equally high" (Boas 1894:303-304; 1911:6-8; my italics).

Similar changes in the use of the word "culture" were introduced by Boas into his translation for publication in 1940 of a talk he first gave in German in 1887: "The Aims of Ethnology" (e.g., 1889:9; 1940:629). Considered along with certain passages in the letter diary of his Arctic expedition in 1883 (Stocking 1965b:61), these bits of evidence all lead toward one conclusion: Boas began his career with a notion of culture that was still within the framework of traditional humanist and contemporary evolutionist usage. It was still a singular phenomenon, present to a higher or lower degree in all peoples. By 1911, this meaning in the examples cited above is given instead to "civilization." It would seem that by this time Boas sensed that the word "culture" was better reserved for the "cultures" of individual human groups.

What is involved here is precisely the emergence of the modern anthropological concept. In the case of this particular inherited name, we are fortunate in having an inflectional indicator of the crucial changes of meaning. Pre-anthropological "culture" is singular in connotation, the anthropological is plural. In all my reading of Tylor, I have noted no instance in which the word "culture" appears in the plural (Stocking 1963b). In extended researches into American social science between 1890 and 1915, I found no instances of the plural form in writers other than Boas prior to 1895. Men referred to "cultural stages" or "forms of culture," as indeed Tylor had before, but they did not speak of "cultures." The plural appears with regularity only in the first generation of Boas' students around 1910 (Stocking 1962:35-36; cf. Stocking 1960).

What had happened between 1894 and 1911 is too complex to treat here in its entire detail, but it is worth suggesting the more important outlines before analyzing one aspect systematically. It was in this period that Boas developed a thoroughgoing critique of the fundamental assumptions of evolutionist ethnology. Underlying this critique was a holistic and historicist point of view that came in part from Boas' training in geography and that tied him to the German romantic tradition. This historicism provided a somewhat discordant counterpoint to the positivistic materialistic orientation that he associated with his training in physics (Stocking 1965b:56, 64). The former drove him always to the detailed consideration of the individual cultural phenomenon in its actual historical context rather than as an element in an abstract evolutionary sequence. Boas' critique of evolutionism was developed in a series of articles in the 1890's (Boas 1891, 1896a, 1896b). By 1904 it had been generalized in the following terms:

the grand system of the evolution of culture, that is valid for all humanity, is losing much of its plausibility. In place of a single line of evolution there appears a multiplicity of converging and diverging lines which it is difficult to bring under one system [1904:522].

In the context of this multiplicity the singular "culture" of the evolutionists became plural.

Much more could be said about Franz Boas and the culture concept. For present purposes, however, I am more interested in a specific aspect of this change: the process by which the behavioral significance of "culture" was inverted, with the concept acquiring the freighting of behavioral determinism that is the peculiarly anthropological component of its modern anthropological meaning. Boas' thinking on this question was developed in relation to the problem of primitive mentality—or of what in the context of the linked evolutionist hierarchies of race and culture was the same thing: the problem of racial mental capacity. Boas first attacked this problem in the above-mentioned "Human Faculty as Determined by Race," which he chose as the topic of his address as retiring vice-president of the anthropological section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1894. Most of the arguments against traditional racial assumptions that Boas was to use 17 years later in *The Mind of Primitive Man* are employed here: the emphasis on the historical conditions of diffusion and the relativity of standards of valuation as the basis for rejecting traditional assumptions about racial achievement; the emphasis on the overlapping or divergent character of physical differences and the functional, environmental factors affecting them; the explanation of apparent racial mental differences in terms of differing cultural traditions.

But if there is already an emphasis on the cultural determination of behavior, it is worth noting the limitations of Boas' cultural determinism. Boas offers as authoritative the opinion of his close friend the neurologist Henry H. Donaldson that at adolescence there is a great divergence between "lower and higher races" in their capacity for education, and that this is related to a cessation of growth in the cerebral cortices of the lower races (1894:316-317). However, Donaldson's opinion was quite clearly an inference from the observed, but, as we now know, culturally conditioned, fact that "lower races" become difficult to teach in adolescence. This would suggest that the idea of the cultural determination of behavior was not well enough developed in 1894 to cope with such a problem as the differential performance of various racial groups within the American educational system. Quite the contrary: in calling for psychophysical tests of "the senses and of the simpler mental activities of children," which might give the first satisfactory answer to the much mooted question of racial faculty, Boas suggested that the schools would be an ideal place to investigate "great numbers of individuals of different races who live under similar conditions" (1894:324).

Boas was not the only anthropologist in this period who was looking to the new experimental psychology of the 1870's and 1880's for a more precise definition of racial mental differences (cf. Brinton 1892: 202). But in fact the results of the few systematic applications attempted were somewhat ambiguous. This is true even of two major racial tests that have since been referred to as landmarks in the rejection of racial mental differences. In 1898 the British anthropologist A. C. Haddon led an expedition to the islands in the Torres

Straits between New Guinea and Australia. There the psychologists accompanying the expedition, W. H. R. Rivers and his students C. S. Myers and William McDougall, investigated experimentally a wide range of sensory abilities in the native population. Much of the hoped-for significance of the tests lay in the fact that these people had been only 30 years before "in a completely savage state, absolutely untouched by civilization" (Haddon 1901: 2-3). They were thus at or near the very bottom of the scale of cultural evolution. However, the results of these investigations were inconclusive. In some cases the differences between Papuan savages and civilized Englishmen were slight; in others, the investigators were inclined to explain them in cultural terms (42-43, 94). Nevertheless, some differences were clearly assumed to be innate. McDougall concluded that the Papuan sense of touch was "twice as delicate as that of the Englishmen, while their susceptibility to pain is hardly half as great" (195). Myers, despite the equivocal results of his own tests, suggested that differences in reaction times might be the "expression of racial differences in temperament" (223).

Perhaps because they were not clear-cut, the over-all results of the Torres Straits investigations were variously evaluated. Although Rivers was pushed toward the conclusion that "pure sense-acuity is much the same in all races" (1904:391), he still felt that the apparent insensitivity to the color blue he found in the Papuans, and later among the Todas and the peasants of Egypt, lent support to the theory first suggested by William Gladstone in 1858 that the color sense of man had evolved with advancing civilization. He was also much impressed by the fact that the Todas, who in general "cultural" development "undoubtedly" stood intermediate between Papuans and Englishmen, also occupied an intermediate position on a number of his sensory measures; this suggested to him that there was a connection between these and "general intellectual development" (1904:331-334, 392-396).

No matter how they were later interpreted, the Torres Straits studies did not lead William Rivers immediately to the conclusion that there were no racial mental differences of evolutionary significance. As for McDougall, he went on to become a spokesman for the inequality of races, and in fact recalled his Torres Straits experience as evidence for the extroverted, sympathetic, and submissive racial temperament of the Negro (1921:119). Finally, it may be noted that reviewers also differed in interpreting the results; some saw them in Spencerian, others in Boasian terms (Burnett 1901:753-754; Jastrow 1902:743; Davis 1903:83-84).

A much more extensive study of racial mental differences was carried out in 1904 at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. In order to demonstrate the "course of progress running from lower to higher humanity and that all the physical and cultural types of man mark stages in that course," W J McGee gathered together a remarkable collection of "ethnic types" from all the major races, including those "least removed from the sub-human or quadrumanous form": Pygmies, Negritos, Ainu, Patagonians, and various American Indians (Francis 1913:524, 534). In this arch-evolutionary context,

Columbia University psychologist Robert Woodworth and his student Frank Bruner examined some 1,100 persons. Besides standard anthropometric measurements, they tested vision and hearing and "intelligence as well as we could with form boards and other simple performance tests . . ." (Woodworth 1939:17-18). Bruner, in the only systematic published treatment of their results, found "an obvious superiority of whites" over "inferior races" in keenness of hearing. In interpreting these results, he suggested that since the tests required an interpretation of stimuli in which intelligence played a role, the poorer performance of Pygmies might be because they were in general "stupid and dense" (Bruner 1908:7, 10, 109-112). Reviewing Bruner's work in the *AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST*, Clark Wissler felt that Bruner had fallen into "the popular way of considering the traditional cultural ranks of peoples as identical with corresponding differences in intelligence." But he also concluded that the results "made it practically certain that racial differences exist" (Wissler 1908:465-467).

By 1914, Bruner seems to have changed his mind about primitive mentality. He now criticized sharply a writer who postulated wide racial differences in mental organization, "ignoring such authorities as Boas, Haddon, Rivers, and others" (Bruner 1914:384). By this time, however, Bruner's mentor Woodworth had made his own analysis of "Racial Differences in Mental Traits." Reviewing the results of the 1904 studies, Woodworth concluded, in 1910, that "sensory and motor processes, and the elementary brain activities, though differing in degree from one individual to another, are about the same from one race to another." As far as intelligence was concerned, there were as yet no adequate tests. True, the simple "form test" used in 1904 had differentiated two groupings that differed also in relative cranial size. But even this small "crumb" of racial difference was doubtful since the "fairness" of the test for "wild hunting folk" was questionable (1910:178-181).

Woodworth did not mention the name of his own mentor, but the structure of his argument made this perfectly clear. He began with a statement of the methodological problems that cast doubt on apparently clear-cut results. Thus the two-ounce difference in the mean weights of Negro and white brains must be viewed in the context of a range of variation of 25 ounces within each race that was largely overlapping. He went on to offer an alternative explanation in cultural terms for every presumably "racial" difference. Thus differences in pain thresholds might reflect a difference in the "conception of pain" rather than in the "pain sense." He concluded by arguing the role of accidental or historical factors in the development of civilization (1910:172-177). It should not surprise us that Woodworth had taken his anthropometric and statistical training under Franz Boas, and had gained from him "some appreciation of the value of anthropology to the psychologist" (Woodworth 1939:12).

The following year, 1911, Boas brought out *The Mind of Primitive Man*, and in it incorporated much of his 1894 address on racial mental capacity. Although they were scattered through the book under the various categories of a much elaborated discussion, large chunks of the 1894 text were virtually

unchanged. His basic sceptical, agnostic posture remained essentially the same, and he still proceeded by attacking traditional racial assumptions and by positing alternative cultural explanations. But it is fairly clear that his estimate of their relative probabilities had changed over the intervening years. In part this may have been due to an accumulation of negative evidence. Boas cited the conclusion of Franklin Mall that there was as yet no evidence of racial difference in brain structure "that will endure serious criticism" (1911:29). So also Karl Pearson's "elaborate attempt" to investigate the relationship between intelligence and head-form had led Pearson to conclude that "the onus of proof" might now "be left to those who *a priori* regard such an association as probable" (24). The argument of Boas' friend Donaldson is still noted, but to an entirely different point (28). And as for the anticipated evidence of psychological testing, Boas cites Rivers and Woodworth to suggest that "up to this time the results are, on the whole, not very favorable to the theory of the occurrence of very fundamental differences between different races" (117-118).

But the change in Boas' estimate of probabilities was not due only to the negative character of the recent evidence. On the contrary, the fact that the evidence was negative was largely because it had been subjected to the same sort of sceptical criticism that Boas had employed in 1894. The change took place mainly because Boas had in the intervening years greatly elaborated the alternative explanation of mental differences in terms of cultural determinism.

Already in 1894 Boas had attacked a number of Spencer's generalizations about primitive mentality on the basis of his own experiences with Indians in the field. Did Spencer charge the savage with inattention, and document his charge with a traveler's account? Boas offered in rebuttal his own field work with the same tribe: the Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island. To a Kwakiutl, most of the questions asked by casual travelers seemed "trifling," and he soon tired of conversation carried on in a foreign language. But once arouse his interest and it was Boas who was often "wearied out first." The supreme test was of course the potlatch, in which the Kwakiutl, with "great foresight and constant application," and "without mnemonic aids," planned the "systematic distribution of their property in such a manner as to increase their wealth and social position" (1894:320-321). Summarizing, Boas suggested that descriptive psychological evidence was not "a safe guide," for the observer was "always liable to interpret as racial character what is only an effect of social surroundings" (326).

When Boas returned to the question of racial mental differences in 1901, the cultural argument was no longer subordinated to the discussion of brain weights and body types. Cultural determinism was now the central theme. In 1894, the only suggestion of a theoretical psychological framework for the explanation of this determinism was a reference to the social psychologist Gabriel Tarde, who had demonstrated in 1890 the force of unconscious "imitation" among civilized as well as primitive men (1894:322-323). By 1901, in discussion with his colleague the psychologist Livingston Farrand,

Boas had worked out a more systematic psychological approach in associationist terms. The central issue in the discussion of primitive mentality was whether groups of men differed in the basic mental organization governing the fundamental psychological processes, or simply in the repetitive experience in terms of which these processes operated—it being one of the “fundamental laws of psychology that the repetition of mental processes increases the facility with which these processes are performed, and decreases the degree of consciousness that accompanies them” (1901:2).

Regarding the basic organization of the mind, Boas considered the evidence of three characteristic mental functions: abstraction, inhibition, and choice. The existence of numerical and grammatical categories in all languages showed that abstraction was common to all men. Similarly, all human groups subjected their impulses to the inhibition of some type of customary control and exercised choice among perceptions or actions in terms of some sort of esthetic or ethical standards. Granting that these capacities must have evolved in time, granting they might differ in development, Boas argued that the differences were not great enough to allow living men to be placed on different evolutionary stages (1901:3–6).

Turning from the organization of the mind to the variety of experience, Boas argued that the variation in the products of these mental functions was largely due to the “influence of the contents of the mind upon the formation of thoughts and actions.” Apparent primitive deficiencies in the “logical interpretations of perceptions” were the result of the “character of the ideas with which the new perception associates itself.” The education of the civilized child transmitted to him a large body of knowledge based on the investigations and speculations of generations of scientists and scholars. Most people, however, received this knowledge simply as “folk-lore.” Hearing of the explosion of a “previously unknown chemical,” they simply assumed that certain materials had the “property of exploding under proper conditions.” But for the primitive, the traditional context of a sudden explosion was a world in which he had been taught as a child to regard the heavens as animate and the very stones as endowed with life. Small wonder he should cower in superstitious fear! Neither he nor the European offered a causal explanation of the new perception. They simply amalgamated it with “other known facts.” The difference was largely “in the character of the traditional material.” It was in this context that Boas argued the “immense importance of folk-lore in determining the *mode of thought*” (1901:6–7).

In this and several other articles written in the same decade, Boas offered various suggestions concerning the actual mechanisms of the tyranny of custom (1904, 1910). Giving his argument a greater integration than in fact it had, we might say that for Boas the origin of custom was rooted in an historical past largely inaccessible to the present-day observer. Evolutionists like Tylor and Spencer had attempted to recreate the origin of customary beliefs and actions as products of “conscious reasoning” by savages handicapped by an inadequate view of nature. Granting that patterns of customary belief and

behavior might have been conscious inventions, Boas felt it more likely for them to arise unconsciously out of the "general conditions of life." This was certainly true of the complex morphological categories that lay hidden in every language. Why not then of the equally complex Australian kinship system or the "fundamental religious notions"? But in any case, once established, a piece of customary behavior tended to become more unconscious the more it was repeated. Paradoxically, this went hand in hand with an increase in its "emotional value"; for "the more automatic any series of activities or a certain form of thought has become, the greater is the conscious effort required for the breaking off from the old habit of acting and thinking, and the greater also the displeasure . . . produced by an innovation" (1904:246). Although such displeasure was in the first instance a "reflex action accompanied by emotions not due to conscious speculation" (246), this displeasure itself brought customary behavior to consciousness. To justify their emotional reactions, men offered a rationalistic pseudo-explanation for the custom at issue.

An even more potent factor tending "to bring customary behavior into the consciousness of the people practicing it" (1910:381) was the necessity of transmitting it from one generation to the next. Unconscious imitation was never completely efficacious. Children would misbehave or ask questions, and adults would have to explain. The character of such secondary explanation depended, however, not on the actual historical basis of the custom, which was either unconscious or long since obscured, but rather on the context of ideas in which it existed in the present. Among primitives, this context was religious and symbolic, and "apparently trifling actions" came to be associated with ideas so sacred that the resistance to deviance took on the character of a taboo. In modern Europe, the religious context was giving way to the rational-utilitarian, and our secondary explanation for the reflexive abhorrence of incest, for example, had changed accordingly. But in whatever stage of culture, the rationalistic secondary explanation gave to customary action a moral cast, and the breach of custom was considered "essentially unethical." It was in this context that Boas maintained that the difference between our own and primitive mentality was the "product of the diversity of the cultures that furnish the material with which the mind operates" rather than a reflection of "fundamental difference in mental organization" (1904:243).

In developing the argument against racial mental differences, Boas had begun by maintaining that primitive men have all the characteristic human mental powers. But this depended in turn on showing that these powers were conditioned in all stages of cultural development—or in all cultures—by the body of custom and traditional material that was transmitted from one generation to the next. If he was still enough of a Victorian liberal-positivist to retain a limited belief in the progress of civilization, the general effect of Boas' argument was to show that the behavior of all men, regardless of race or cultural stage, was determined by a traditional body of habitual behavior patterns passed on through what we would now call the enculturative process and buttressed by ethically tainted secondary rationalizations. Boas had started

out to show that the mind of the dark-skinned primitive shared with that of the white-skinned European the powers of abstraction, inhibition, and choice. He ended by arguing that thought, action, and choice, whether primitive or civilized, were largely determined by the particular body of tradition and custom "that has been controlling all our actions since the time of our birth" (1901:11).

It may be that a necessary context for this change was the changed circumstances in which the study of folklore was carried on in the United States. In Europe, folklore was studied as the survival, among the lower orders of modern civilized society, of explanations that had been but were no longer rational. If it was seen as not integral to the culture of which it was a part, it was nevertheless continuous with it. In this country, there was a radical discontinuity between the culture out of which the anthropologist came and the culture in which he studied folklore. But the functional integration of folklore with the rest of culture was perhaps more clearly evident (cf. Hodgen 1936; Herskovits 1946). In any case, what Boas did, in effect, was to invert the meaning folklore had had for the evolutionary anthropologist. Tylor had seen folklore as originally rational in origin, but surviving as irrational custom. Boas saw it as unconscious in origin, but central to the maintenance of society through its rationalization of traditional forms of behavior.

In this process, the meaning of the idea of culture was also inverted. The body of customary and traditional material that was very nearly all that Indians could claim in the way of traditional humanist culture served in the Boasian context to define the crucial aspect of culture on all levels of human development and in all its manifestations. Indeed, science itself was subjugated to the tyranny of custom:

We recognize, however, that we cannot remodel, without serious emotional resistance, any of the fundamental lines of thought and action which are determined by our early education, and which form the subconscious basis of all of our activities. This is evinced by the attitude of civilized communities towards religion, politics, art, and the fundamental concepts of science. . . . The history of the progress of science yields example after example of the power of resistance belonging to old ideas, even after increasing knowledge of the world has undermined the ground on which they were erected. Their overthrow is not brought about until a new generation has arisen, to whom the old is no longer dear and near [1904:253-254].

And beyond science, there were the "thousand activities and modes of thought that constitute our daily life"—"activities and modes of which we are never even conscious" until "we come into contact with other types of life, or until we are prevented from acting according to our custom . . .," which can lay no claim to greater rationality than alternative activities and modes and "to which, nevertheless, we cling." Learned "less by instruction than by imitation," these were "hardly less numerous in civilized than in primitive culture," and with good reason: "because they constitute the whole series of well-established habits according to which the necessary actions of every-day life are performed" (253-254). Almost unnoticed, the idea of culture, which once connoted all that freed man from the blind weight of tradition, was now identified with that very burden, and that burden was seen as functional to the continuing daily existence of individuals in any culture.

In presenting Boas' argument, I have deliberately emphasized certain aspects at the expense of others, and have in several instances placed quoted passages in a relationship slightly different from that in which they appear in the original. It might be argued that the cultural determinism I have described is in part extrapolated from Boas' work. But this is precisely the point. Boas was transitional, and his own thinking retained strong residual elements of Victorian liberal commitment to "progress in civilization." Even in *The Mind of Primitive Man* Boas still uses "culture" in various senses, speaking on one occasion of the "most highly cultured families" (1911:119). This particular instance occurs in a long passage incorporated almost verbatim from the 1894 essay (cf. 1894:324-326). Boas' inconsistencies of usage in 1911 would thus seem to be in part the artifact of his auctorial method: he in effect compiled *The Mind of Primitive Man* from earlier articles, shifting chunks of material to create a new structure, but for the most part leaving the actual prose untouched.

But to explain the inconsistencies thus does not detract from their significance: Boas was inconsistent because he was a transitional figure. It was not Boas but his students who were largely responsible for the elaboration and development of the anthropological concept. Nevertheless, as several of them have noted, they were very often simply elaborating leads that are to be found in Boas' work (e.g., Benedict 1943; Herskovits 1953:69). Furthermore, these leads are not there as random elements, as adventitious manifestations of ideas long current in western European anthropological thought. They are there as part of a systematic critique of what was for at least 30 years the prevailing anthropological point of view.

It might also be objected that the cultural determinism that I have discussed could exist without being associated with the word "culture" itself (or that the idea of cultural plurality could antedate the shift in meaning that enabled the term to take a plural). And in a sense this is quite true. The idea that human behavior is conditioned by the historical tradition out of which it arises is hardly an innovation of the late 19th century. Nor was it only in anthropology that human behavior was subjected to a deterministic ordinance. But even granting this, it is nevertheless true that the specific association of the idea of behavioral determinism with the idea of culture not only symbolized but facilitated a great change in our ways of thinking about mankind. That thinkers in other areas were also involved in this process simply emphasizes its magnitude (cf. White 1949; Hughes 1958).

Focusing only on those aspects of the change having specifically to do with the culture idea, one might say that it involved the rejection of simplistic models of biological or racial determinism; it involved the rejection of ethnocentric standards of cultural evaluation; it involved a new appreciation of the role of unconscious social processes in the determination of human behavior; it implied a conception of man not as a *rational* so much as a *rationalizing* being (cf. Stocking 1960). Taken as a whole, it might be said that this change involved—to appropriate the language of Thomas Kuhn—the emergence of what may be called the modern social scientific paradigm for the study of

mankind. The idea of culture, radically transformed in meaning, is a central element of this paradigm, and indeed much of the social science of the 20th century may be seen as a working out in detail of the implications of the culture idea. While the anthropological idea of culture still carries with it the element of human creativity that is part of the heritage of its name, the context of that creativity will never again be the same as it was for E. B. Tylor.

Having mentioned Kuhn, I would like now to introduce a quotation from his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; it might have served as a third epigraph for this essay, but can serve instead as the text for its peroration. It provides, I think, a framework that can encompass the epigraphs of both Freud and Bloch, that can allow both for the element of human creativity and for the conditioning of cultural tradition:

Verbal definitions like Boyle's [of an "element"] have little scientific content when considered by themselves. . . . The scientific concepts to which they point gain full significance only when related, within a text or other systematic presentation, to other scientific concepts. . . . It follows that concepts like that of an element can scarcely be invented independent of context. Furthermore, given the context, they rarely require invention because they are already at hand.

What then was Boyle's historical function in that part of his work that includes the famous "definition"? He was a leader of a scientific revolution that, by changing the relation of "element" to chemical manipulation and chemical theory, transformed the notion into a tool quite different from what it had been before and transformed both chemistry and the chemist's world in the process [Kuhn 1962:141-142].

Boas did not, as Tylor has been assumed to have done,<sup>2</sup> offer a definition of anthropological "culture." But what he did do was to provide an important portion of the context in which the word acquired its characteristic anthropological meaning. He was a leader of a cultural revolution that, by changing the relation of "culture" to the burden of tradition and the processes of human reason, transformed the notion into a tool quite different from what it had been before. In the process he helped to transform both anthropology and the anthropologist's world.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented informally to a meeting of the History of Science Dinner Club, University of California, Berkeley, in March 1964, and subsequently, in very nearly its present form, to the History of Science Colloquium, University of California, Berkeley, and to the Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, in October and November, 1965. It is intended in part as sequel to an earlier article in this same journal (Stocking 1963a), and like that article draws on material in a paper presented to the Conference on the History of Anthropology of the Social Science Research Council in 1962 (Stocking 1962). I would like to thank Paul Forman, Roger Hahn, A. I. Hallowell, Dell Hymes, and Sheldon Rothblatt for their stimulus and assistance, and my research assistant, David Nicholas, for his translations of portions of Boas (1889).

<sup>2</sup> Exactly how and by whom the anthropological culture concept came to be attributed to Tylor is an interesting question. It may well be that it was Robert Lowie, whose *Culture and Ethnology* is the first attempt at anthropological popularization by a member of the first generation of Boas' students, who grew up, as it were, with the new usage. On its very first page Lowie, conscious of the duality of usage, suggests that like any other fundamental concept, culture "can be properly understood only by an enlarged familiarity with the facts it summarizes." Thus far, he reflected the actual process of its emergence in Boas' work and in his own apprenticeship.

But, he continued, "we must, however, start with some proximate notion of what we are to discuss, and for this purpose Tylor's definition in the opening sentence of his *Primitive Culture* will do as well as any" (1917:5). That Lowie turned to Tylor is hardly surprising. There were at this point very few general treatments of cultural anthropology in English, and Tylor's death early that year had called attention once again to his contribution. But it is worth noting that in quoting Tylor's definition, Lowie introduced the three dots that for so long tended to obscure the true character of Tylor's conception of "culture" by eliminating its synonymy with "civilization."

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