THE ROLE OF THE "BOASIANS" PHENOMENON IN US ANTHROPOLOGY: THE FORMATION OF A SCIENTIFIC SCHOOL AND ACADEMIC EXPANSION

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the historical formation and strategic expansion of the "Boasian School," a scientific community that established hegemony over American anthropology in the early 20th century. While Franz Boas provided the theoretical foundation, the transformation of anthropology into a recognized academic discipline was achieved through the institutional placement of his doctoral students—including Alfred Kroeber, Edward Sapir, and Fay-Cooper Cole—in key universities across the United States. Drawing on the historiography of Marvin Harris and George Stocking, this study demonstrates how the Boasians replaced the evolutionist paradigm with cultural relativism and established a unified professional standard through the control of university departments, journals, and funding. The research highlights this phenomenon as a model of successful scientific institutionalization.*

Keywords: *The Boasians, Alfred Kroeber, academic expansion, cultural determinism, scientific succession, Chicago School, Berkeley School.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of science demonstrates that the triumph of a new paradigm relies not merely on the intellectual superiority of ideas but on the existence of a cohesive community of scholars capable of disseminating them.

In the context of American science, the transition from 19th-century evolutionary anthropology to modern cultural anthropology was not a gradual evolution but a structural revolution orchestrated by Franz Boas (1858–1942) and his students. By the 1920s, the "Boasians" had effectively captured the intellectual and administrative heights of the discipline, a phenomenon historians refer to as the "Boasian Revolution".

Prior to this expansion, anthropology in the United States was centered in Washington, D.C., dominated by government bureaus and museums (such as the Smithsonian Institution) that adhered to social evolutionism and racial typology.

Boas shifted the center of gravity to the university, specifically Columbia University in New York, and from there launched a systematic expansion to the West Coast and the Midwest. This was not a random migration of scholars but a strategic occupation of academic space.

This article aims to reconstruct the mechanisms of this expansion. It examines how the Boas School functioned as a unified network, standardizing methodology, establishing new departments, and defining the professional identity of the American anthropologist.

Understanding this process is crucial for comprehending how anthropology solidified its status as a holistic social science distinct from biology and history.

2. METHODS

This study employs a combination of prosopographical analysis and institutional history.

• Prosopographical Analysis: The research examines the collective biography of the first generation of Boas's students (PhD graduates between 1901 and 1920). It analyzes their academic trajectories, mentor-student correspondence, and collaborative efforts to secure funding and positions.

• Institutional History: The study focuses on the establishment and curriculum development of three major anthropological centers established or reformed by Boasians: The University of California, Berkeley (under A. Kroeber), the University of Chicago (under F.C. Cole and E. Sapir), and Yale University (under E. Sapir).

The primary theoretical framework is drawn from Marvin Harris's The Rise of Anthropological Theory [1], which provides a critical analysis of the school's theoretical unity, and Regna Darnell's Invisible Genealogies [2], which offers a detailed map of the personal and professional networks that sustained the school's dominance.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Columbia University as the Training Ground for a New Paradigm

The foundation of the school's success was laid at Columbia University, where Franz Boas established the first rigorous doctoral program in anthropology in the United States. Prior to Boas's tenure, anthropology was largely dominated by museum curators and government officials who practiced "armchair anthropology," relying on travelers' accounts and organizing cultures into a hierarchical evolutionary scale (savagery-barbarism-civilization). Boas dismantled this approach by creating a "personnel training pipeline" based on strict empirical standards.

At Columbia, Boas acted as a rigorous gatekeeper. He established a curriculum that required students to master the "Four-Field Approach"—physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and ethnology—before specializing.

Crucially, he made extended fieldwork in native languages a mandatory requirement for the PhD. Between 1901 and 1911, Boas produced the first seven doctorates in anthropology in the US, including Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, and Alexander Goldenweiser. This cohort formed a tight-knit intellectual core, often referred to as the "First Generation."

Through weekly seminars and close supervision, Boas instilled a shared methodological rigor—specifically, "Historical Particularism"—which rejected universal laws of cultural evolution in favor of detailed historical reconstruction of individual cultures. By controlling the production of the first professional degrees, Boas effectively monopolized the supply of qualified personnel for the emerging university market, ensuring that any new department opening in the country would likely be staffed by a Columbia graduate.

3.2. Alfred Kroeber and the Conquest of the West (The Berkeley Model)

The most significant strategic move in the school's expansion was the appointment of Alfred Kroeber to the University of California, Berkeley, in 1901. This was not merely a job placement; it was the establishment of a "western command center" for Boasian anthropology.

Charged with establishing a department and a museum from scratch with funding from philanthropist Phoebe Hearst, Kroeber replicated the Boasian model on the West Coast, effectively balancing the influence of the East Coast establishment.

At Berkeley, Kroeber oversaw the massive "Survey of California Indians," a salvage ethnography project that generated thousands of pages of linguistic and cultural data and resulted in the monumental Handbook of Indians of California (1925). This project served a dual purpose: it saved disappearing cultural data, and it trained a new generation of graduate students in the Boasian method. Kroeber's theoretical contribution, particularly the concept of the "Superorganic" (1917), provided the philosophical justification for separating anthropology from biology. He argued that culture is a phenomenon sui generis that cannot be reduced to individual psychology or biological race. Under Kroeber's leadership, Berkeley became the largest anthropological research center in the country outside of New York, producing PhDs who then populated universities in the western United States, further cementing the school's hegemony**.**

3.3. Chicago and Yale: Professionalization in the Midwest

While Kroeber secured the West, the Midwest was secured through the University of Chicago, a critical node in the American academic network. Fay-Cooper Cole, a student of Boas, navigated the complex politics of the region to establish a department that strictly adhered to Boasian standards. In the late 1920s, the department was significantly strengthened by the arrival of Edward Sapir (from Ottawa and later moving to Yale), who brought the immense prestige of rigorous linguistic anthropology.

The "Chicago School" became famous for its methodological rigor and its focus on professionalizing the sub-disciplines. Cole was instrumental in transforming archaeology in the Midwest from amateur treasure hunting into a scientific discipline based on stratigraphy and typology. Meanwhile, Sapir institutionalized linguistics as a mandatory tool for ethnographic research, arguing that the structure of language determines the structure of thought (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). By the 1930s, the University of Chicago was producing a steady stream of PhDs who populated universities throughout the central United States. This ensured that the Boasian paradigm—specifically the integration of the four fields—became the national standard for the discipline, marginalizing the older, museum-based evolutionary approaches that had previously dominated the region.

3.4. The Ideological Front: Culture and Personality

The expansion of the Boasians was not limited to administrative control of departments; it also involved the conquest of public opinion and the expansion of the discipline's scope into psychology. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, key figures in the second generation of Boasians at Columbia, played a crucial role in this phase. They developed the "Culture and Personality" school, which applied Boasian cultural relativism to psychological questions.

Benedict's bestseller Patterns of Culture (1934) and Mead's Coming of Age in Samoa (1928) translated complex anthropological theories into accessible concepts for the American public. They successfully argued that human behavior, gender roles, and adolescence were not biologically determined but were shaped by cultural patterns.

This was a strategic victory for the school: it moved Boasian ideas beyond the university walls and into the American intellectual mainstream. By demonstrating the practical relevance of anthropology to modern social problems (such as education and child-rearing), Benedict and Mead secured the discipline's status as a vital social science, distinct from history or sociology.

3.5. Institutional Consolidation and Control of Resources

A critical, often overlooked result of the Boasian expansion was the school's systematic takeover of the "means of scientific production"—journals, funding bodies, and professional associations. By the 1920s, Boas and his students effectively controlled the American Anthropologist, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). This allowed them to set the standards for what constituted "publishable" research, effectively excluding evolutionary or racist scholarship.

Furthermore, Boasians gained significant influence within the National Research Council (NRC) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the primary bodies allocating research grants. By controlling the flow of money and the certification of knowledge (peer review), the network ensured that the "Four-Field Approach" and cultural relativism became the only viable path for academic advancement. This institutional hegemony completed the revolution: within one generation, the Boasians had transformed American anthropology from a fragmented field of amateurs into a unified, professionalized academic discipline with a shared paradigm.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Boasian expansion reveals that the establishment of American anthropology as a cohesive academic discipline was not an inevitable outcome of intellectual progress, but the result of a deliberate and highly effective sociological process. The "Boasian Revolution" represents a unique case study in the history of science where a single school of thought successfully monopolized the institutional infrastructure of an entire field within two generations. This discussion interprets the mechanisms of this dominance and contrasts the American experience with alternative models of anthropological development.

4.1. The Network as an Institutional Engine

The primary mechanism of the Boasian expansion was the creation of a "centripetal" professional network. Unlike the development of ethnography in the Soviet Union, which was centralized and standardized through state planning and adherence to the theoretical framework of historical materialism, the centralization of American anthropology was organic and entrepreneurial. It relied on what sociologists of science call a "patronage network." Franz Boas functioned as the central node, distributing resources (funding, job recommendations, publishing opportunities) to a trusted circle of students who adhered to his methodological rigor.

This network structure explains why the "Four-Field Approach" disseminated so rapidly.

It was not merely that Kroeber in California or Cole in Chicago agreed with Boas theoretically; rather, their institutional legitimacy depended on maintaining the connection to the Columbia core. This created a high degree of "institutional isomorphism"—new departments looked exactly like the Columbia department because they were built by products of that system.

This contrasts sharply with the European tradition, where distinct "national schools" (e.g., the sociological school in France, the functionalist school in Britain) often co-existed or competed without achieving the total hegemonic control seen in the US.

4.2. The Shift from "Objects" to "Problems": The Museum-University Transition

The expansion of the Boas school marks the decisive shift of anthropology's center of gravity from the museum to the university.

This was not just a change of location but a fundamental change in the epistemological nature of the discipline. The pre-Boasian, museum-based anthropology (represented by the Smithsonian) was object-oriented: it focused on classifying material culture into evolutionary stages.

By moving the discipline into the university (Columbia, Berkeley, Chicago, Yale), the Boasians transformed anthropology into a problem-oriented science. The focus shifted from the "artifact" to the "mind" of the native. Kroeber's "Superorganic" and Benedict's "Patterns of Culture" were theoretical constructs that could not be displayed in a museum case; they required academic analysis.

This transition legitimized anthropology as a serious social science comparable to sociology or psychology, rather than a branch of natural history. This distinction is crucial when comparing the US trajectory to the Soviet or Continental models, where the "Museum of Ethnography" often remained the primary site of knowledge production for much longer, preserving a more descriptive, material-culture focus.

4.3. The Invention of "Culture" as a Disciplinary Boundary

The most significant outcome of the Boasian consolidation was the standardization of the concept of "Culture" (plural, relativistic) as the central object of study. Before this consolidation, the boundaries between biology (race) and behavior were porous.

By enforcing the "Four-Field Approach," the Boasians did not just combine disciplines; they effectively policed the boundaries of their field.

They established a rigid distinction: Physical Anthropology studies the biological organism, but Cultural Anthropology studies the learned behavior, and the two vary independently.

This intellectual separation was maintained only because the institutional structure (the unified department) kept the sub-fields in dialogue but distinct. In contexts where this unification did not happen (e.g., in parts of Europe where physical anthropology remained in medical faculties), the dangerous conflation of race and culture often persisted much longer.

The Boasian "Culture" concept became the professional identity of the American anthropologist—a tool used to assert authority over explaining human differences against biologists or psychologists.

4.4. The Legacy of the Holistic Standard

Ultimately, the success of the Boasian expansion codified the "holistic" standard of the discipline. The requirement that an anthropologist must understand linguistics, archaeology, and biology to study culture prevented the fragmentation of the field. This holistic perspective is arguably the greatest legacy of the Boasian expansion.

It positioned American anthropology uniquely to address complex human problems that are simultaneously biological and social (e.g., the impact of environment on growth, the relationship between language structure and cognition).

The institutional structures established by Kroeber, Sapir, and Cole ensured that this comprehensive vision survived the specialization of the 20th century, providing a model of interdisciplinary integration that remains rare in modern academia.

5. CONCLUSION

The historical reconstruction of the "Boasians" phenomenon leads to the following conclusions regarding the development of American anthropology:

From Individual to Institution: Franz Boas's greatest contribution was not merely theoretical but structural. He transformed anthropology from the pursuit of isolated scholars into a coordinated Scientific School. By strategically placing his students—Alfred Kroeber, Edward Sapir, Fay-Cooper Cole, and others—in key academic centers across the United States, he ensured the longevity and dominance of his methodological principles. The "Boasian Revolution" was, effectively, a successful conquest of the American university system.

National Hegemony and Standardization: The expansion of the Boas school unified American anthropology under a single paradigm. It prevented the fragmentation of the discipline into separate biological and historical sciences, cementing the holistic "Four-Field Approach" as the national standard. This network successfully marginalized competing schools (such as the Washington evolutionists) and established a rigorous professional identity based on fieldwork and linguistic competence.

Legacy for Future Models: The success of the Boas school serves as a historical model for the formation of academic disciplines. It demonstrates that for a science to flourish, it requires strong institutional bases—departments, museums, and professional associations—united by a clear methodological vision and a cohesive community of scholars. The modern structure of anthropology in the US is a direct result of this strategic expansion in the early 20th century.

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