

ANNALS OF CULTURE

THE MEASURE OF AMERICA

How a rebel anthropologist waged war on racism.

BY CLAUDIA ROTH PIERPONT



Along with the Ferris wheel, the hamburger, Cracker Jack, Aunt Jemima, the zipper, Juicy Fruit, and the vertical file, the word "anthropology" was introduced to a vast number of Americans at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Marking the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America—and opening just a little late, in May, 1893, owing to the amount of construction required to turn a marshy wasteland on Lake Michigan into a neo-classical "White City," as the fair was called—the six-month celebration put on display all that the nation had achieved and still hoped to become. Here proud Americans could view the table on which the Declaration of Independence had been signed, the manuscript of Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address, and two full-scale replicas of the Liberty Bell—one executed entirely in grain, the other in oranges. As for the future, the fair was

LEFT: COURTESY AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY; NAA, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

ablaze with work-reducing inventions, from the electric kitchen to the electric chair. But the most important promise of an American utopia was the extraordinary assembly of peoples. American Indians and native Africans, Germans, Egyptians, and Labrador Eskimos were just a few of those invited to take part in nearly a hundred "living exhibits"—whole villages were imported and exactly rebuilt—with the purpose of expanding American minds: "broadening, opening, lighting up dark corners," a contemporary magazine expounded, "bringing them in sympathy with their fellow men."

No one was more devoted to this goal than a young anthropologist named Franz Boas, who had emigrated from Germany ten years before, staunch in the belief that America was "politically an ideal country." Enthralled by the collections of the American Museum of Natural History, in New York, he had



Franz Boas (above), posing for an exhibit on



the Kwakiutl tribe, in 1895. A Kwakiutl chief (left) at a feast organized by Boas on an expedition to British Columbia in 1894.

made his field of study the Indians of the Northwest Coast—the artistically accomplished Haida, Kwakiutl, and Bella Coola tribes—and, in the days leading up to the fair's triumphal opening, he was busy supplying the final timbers for a pair of houses in which a Kwakiutl group would live, on the bank of a pond outside a small pavilion marked "Anthropology." Inside was a spectacular array of masks and decorated tools, which Boas had spent two years assembling. His expectations for impressing visitors derived less from the works' richly painted surfaces, however, than from their intellectual and imaginative content—what he described as the "wealth of thought" that was clearly visible if only people learned to look. The Indians had been asked to perform the rituals that would enable viewers to perceive this wealth, and had been assured that at the fair they would receive the respect that was their due, even if it had been no part of their experience in the old, demonstrably utopian New World.

In fact, the wretched history of Indian life in nineteenth-century America had long been justified by the claims of anthropology, a field that originated during debates over slavery and the right of settlers to seize the natives' lands, and patriotically embraced such practices as part of the natural racial order. The chief means of establishing the racial order was to measure skulls—both the conveniently empty craniums acquired through a thriving graveyard market and the more resistant living models. Anthropologists presented their findings as objective science: elaborate measuring techniques yielded columns of figures that inevitably placed white intelligence at the top of the scale, red and yellow capacities farther down, and blacks at the wholly uncivilizable bottom. It was no coincidence that this science faithfully mirrored popular opinion: published studies were so open in their manipulation of evidence—a higher proportion of male skulls, for example, were employed when larger dimensions were desired—that they appear to have been not conscious attempts at deception but unwitting examples of delusion.

The effects of such studies, however, were painfully real. At mid-century, the anthropologist Samuel Morton asserted that whites and Negroes belonged to different species, while another anthro-



pologist, Josiah Nott, popularized the view that slavery saved Negroes from reverting to their original barbaric state: these authoritative voices resounded in the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, of 1857, in which Chief Justice Roger Taney resolved that "the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit." After Emancipation, theories of separate racial evolutions fuelled the case for black disenfranchisement, right up to the passing of the first Jim Crow laws, around the time of the Chicago fair.

Franz Boas had come of age in a far more liberal scientific tradition. In the first half of the century, the great German natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt had dismissed all hierarchical notions of race. Although the frenzy for measuring skulls later tore through Germany, a professor of medicine named Rudolf Virchow—Boas's most revered teacher—prevented racial prejudice from gaining "scientific" support by strictly controlling the country's anthropological institutions. Boas himself was convinced by his early field work that the accepted view of "primitive" cultures was wrong. In his first substantive article in America, he demolished the standard claim that Indian and Eskimo speakers used different sounds for the same word at different times, and showed that the purported vagueness of "primitive" speech was actually a characteristic of the primitive ears of anthropologists, who transcribed differing approximations of what they heard at different times. The full implications of this change in thinking—how many assumptions about "primitive" faculties depended on flaws in "civilized" perception?—were left unstated. Boas kept his scope narrow and his tone mild: he demonstrated how easily such confusion occurred through mistakes in his own notes.

Boas was not by nature a timid soul. Small in stature but formidably intense, he had a shock of dark hair like an eagle's crest and a face slashed with mysterious scars. (People whispered of early duels.) But he was also a young man desperate for work in a country where scarcely more

Boas's students Zora Neale Hurston, who measured skulls in Harlem, and Margaret Mead, with two Samoan girls; Claude Lévi-Strauss, who sought Boas out in America.

than half a dozen institutions regularly employed an anthropologist. There were plans now for a new museum in Chicago, to be built from the collections amassed for the fair. Boas had moved his family west from New York City; he had invested everything in study and preparation. His future, no less than that of the Indians, was staked on the lessons that he and the fair were going to teach America.

As it turned out, the Chicago fair was a colossal freak show—a racist phantasmagoria, with commercial interests under the guise of “anthropology” catering to every cheap and lurid prejudice. Boas’s Indians could hardly compete for attention with the Egyptian belly dancers and battling Bedouins of the thronging Midway. Native African villagers from Dahomey—bare-breasted and reportedly cannibalistic—were continually invoked in the press as evidence of the American Negro’s savage nature, a judgment given credence by the Smithsonian Institution’s display about racial evolution, which was mounted in the United States pavilion. Few African-Americans had been asked to take part in their country’s exhibits, but on the fairgrounds two eloquent Negro voices were raised. The venerable Frederick Douglass, aged seventy-six, disputed the so-called “Negro Problem” from the Haitian pavilion, proclaiming that Americans’ real problem was whether they could “live up to their own Constitution.” And the crusader Ida B. Wells distributed ten thousand copies of a pamphlet about the increasingly common American ritual of lynching—there had been two hundred and forty-one victims in 1892—which included graphic accounts of horrors committed even while the nation was celebrating the peace and harmony of the White City.

Boas worked at the fair until it closed its gates, and then, after passing a brutal winter in Chicago, he was turned down for the hoped-for museum job, and also for a job at the University of Chicago, with the comment that he did not “take direction” well. Still, his experiences seem to have offered him something valuable: a wider view of America, which, back in New York in the summer of 1894, he put into a speech before the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In carefully practiced English, and with the same regard for detailed proof that he had shown in his

earlier work, Boas stood up and informed the gathered dignitaries that their anthropology amounted to nothing more than a political justification of the suppression of the American Negro.

Ticking off every standard “scientific” claim of black inferiority, Boas demonstrated either its falseness or its dependence on the Negro’s history of privation. “Eminent men,” he pointed out, “represent a much better nourished class.” In failing to take history into account, scientists had confused cause with effect: the plight of the American Negro was the product of racism, not its source. Given the facts of colonialism in Africa, slavery in America, and, above all, the burden that every American Negro continued to bear—“The old race feeling of the inferiority of the colored race is as potent as ever and is a formidable obstacle to its advance”—it was impossible for scientists to infer a lack of inherent ability from the Negroes’ current status: “We might rather wonder how much has been accomplished in a short period against heavy odds.” The speech, as coolly argued as it was heartfelt, marked a turning point in Boas’s thinking and, eventually, in the country’s thinking about race.

Change was, of course, a long time coming, and Boas’s early efforts seemed to do no more than incite the opposition. The august president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Daniel G. Brinton—the author of a textbook that placed the African Negro “midway between the Orangutang and the European white”—responded at the next annual meeting, denying that the differences between the races were a result “merely of opportunities and externalities,” and insisting that some human stocks were “constitutionally recreant to the codes of civilization.” The practical aim of anthropology in providing such knowledge, he concluded, was to lend “a positive basis for legislation, politics, and education as applied to a given ethnic group.” Brinton’s speech was published in *Popular Science Monthly* in November, 1895, six months before the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* established “separate but equal” as the law of the land.

Boas knew that he required an institutional base—such as his German mentors had—where the forces of change might be nourished and grow. He had

given up on such a possibility when, unexpectedly, he found himself with two: by 1896, anthropology had become so newsworthy that the American Museum of Natural History decided it needed a permanent curator, and Columbia College set out to establish a department. Boas took on positions with both, forming a triangular bond that eventually provoked not only pride and accomplishment but also fury and dissent, as, through the decades, he fought for the recognition of Indian and African cultures, for keeping the doors at Ellis Island open, and for civil rights: the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which in 1954 swept away more than a century of racist law, is impossible to imagine without his influence. Such consuming fights were not what Boas had intended in coming here—he had thought that the country might save *him*—but, given his background and his beliefs, he had no choice but to spend his life making a reality of American ideals.

Growing up in the small Prussian city of Minden, Boas practiced eating foods he didn’t like “in order to accustom myself to deprivations in Africa,” and eating no food at all to prepare for the rigors of Arctic travel. He pointed to certain beloved books as the source of his keen explorer’s urge: Humboldt’s “*Cosmos*” and, his favorite, “*Robinson Crusoe*.” As for his egalitarian politics, Boas spoke of his origins in a German home “in which the ideals of the revolution of 1848 were a living force.” But ideological friends and foes alike have suggested a deeper source both for Boas’s longings to escape and for his stalwart liberalism: his enlightened German home was Jewish, and he was born in 1858, ten years after the democratic revolution failed, when the freedoms that had been gained by German Jews were being violently stripped away.

“I am and remain an unregenerate idealist,” Boas wrote to his older sister decades later, “and for that you and I have our mother to thank.” Their mother, Sophie Meyer, and her younger sister Fanny had been swept into the turmoil of 1848 by a medical student named Abraham Jacobi, a member of the illegal Communist League; when, in 1851, Jacobi was arrested for treason, he was carrying letters from both sisters. He spent two years in prison, during which Sophie married

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the gentle and dependable Meier Boas; she was expecting her second child when Jacobi was suddenly released and fled the country, visiting Marx in London and Engels in Manchester before settling in New York, where he married another recent émigré, Sophie's sister Fanny. In the following years, "Uncle Jacobi" in the thrillingly distant and nearly mythical country became a crucial figure for young Franz Uri Boas, Sophie and Meier's only son—they had three girls—to survive past infancy. He was a sickly child, and seashore visits that were intended to improve his health provoked a scientific curiosity that made him drive his frail frame harder; with great excitement, he wrote to Uncle Jacobi about his studies of tides and fossils and about how he had run for hours in the snow and rain to be ready "for America."

And what of the country he was running from? Meier and Sophie considered themselves to be freethinkers, but they were also good Germans who had adopted Christmas as a kind of gift-giving national holiday while continuing to observe Jewish rituals out of family loyalty. Despite worshipping Schiller and other Enlightenment heroes, Franz appears to have been tormented by attendance at the local Protestant *Gymnasium*, where he was steeped in Western *Kultur*—devastating headaches kept him out of school for months at a time—but he was no more content with instruction from a local rabbi, which led to his "confirmation" at thirteen. A sense of unease within each community, a questioning of whether he could attain the full intellectual and aesthetic cultivation that the Germans call *Bildung*: these dilemmas seem to have brought a great deal of pain into his head. A letter he wrote to his older sister around the time of his confirmation recounts with shock that someone had pointed to him in a shop and remarked, "Jewish faces are hard to tell apart." But the shock suggests that overt anti-Semitism had not contributed much to the pain, yet.

It was at university that he learned to duel. He arrived at the University of Heidelberg in 1877, and had won his first scars by the end of a single term, fighting over a complaint of loud piano playing in his room. (He happily swore that his opponents' scars were worse.) Pursuing studies in physics, he moved to the University of Bonn, where, defying his father's request, he joined a fra-

ternity—duels, fought with sabres, were de rigueur for fraternity members—and avenged a variety of insults. If Boas seems to have been spoiling for a fight, by the time he arrived at the University of Kiel, in 1879, the insults had become deliberate, and virulent, and focussed on his being a Jew.

That fall, as the country reached the depths of an economic recession, a struggling politician named Adolf Stöcker delivered a speech against "modern Jewry" to the Prussian state parliament—the first direct appeal to German voters on an anti-Semitic platform—and hit a thunderingly responsive chord; during the next two years, a national petition demanding quotas for Jews in the judiciary and in university teaching gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures. At Kiel, there were anti-Semitic meetings and an anti-Semitic students' petition—in opposition to which Boas and a friend, with great bravado, gathered signatures on a petition of their own. Coming home after completing his doctorate in physics in the spring of 1881, Franz informed his parents that he would again be sporting "a few cuts, one even on the nose! . . . With the damned Jew baiters this winter, one could not survive without quarrel and fighting."

It was Rudolf Virchow who made sure that the "damned Jew baiters" did not sweep away more in their path. A professor at the University of Berlin, and a Progressive Party leader who had twice defeated Stöcker for a seat in the Reichstag, Virchow became Boas's lifelong model of the scientist as social conscience. Boas first approached him seeking instruction in "physical anthropology": the techniques of measuring the body and, in particular, the skull, which served as the foundation of American racial science. It is evidence of just how easily manipulated these techniques were that Virchow used his results to argue for human adaptability—on the model of the body's cells

being continually renewed—and so for a broadly democratic body politic.

The young physicist's goals were veering from what people knew to how they knew it. At twenty-three, Boas informed Uncle Jacobi that he had discovered his professional objective: to study "the relation between the life of a people and their physical environment"—that is, the effects of what Boas would eventually teach us to call "culture" on what he then, more than a decade before Freud entered the field, called "the psychic life." He was not proposing to discover why little German Jewish boys were plagued with headaches or why they grew up to have faces slashed with scars. This was too complex and much too close. He had decided to start with the simplest environment that he could find and, at the same time, sail off into a boyhood dream: he was going to live with the Eskimos.

With little money and no academic backing, Boas persuaded the German Polar Commission to send him on an expedition to map the frozen expanse of Baffin Island, as part of the German contribution to the First International Polar Year. And, in a sudden rush before sailing, in the spring of 1883, he persuaded Marie Krackowizer, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of another revolutionary "Forty-eighter," to agree to become his wife; among his sparse Arctic gear he carried an Imperial flag emblazoned with "Marie."

Although Boas eventually published many studies of Eskimo life, the essential insight that informs all his work appears in a letter addressed to this exceedingly patient young woman—the expedition lasted more than a year—which he wrote after a catastrophic excursion had left his small group wandering half-frozen for twenty-six hours. Safe at last in a warm igloo, and gratefully eating raw seal liver among men who, he noted, always scrupulously shared what food they had, Boas reflected on the "real meaning" of his expedition: "I often ask myself what advantages our 'good society' possesses over that of the 'savages,' and find, the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down on them. Where among our people could you find such true hospitality?" This epiphany—a confirmation, he wrote, of what he had always suspected—seems to have explained and perhaps assuaged the painful lack of ci-

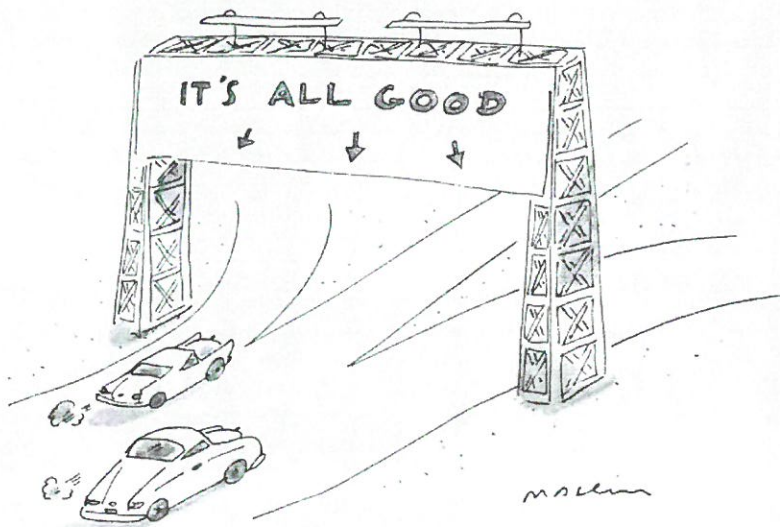


vility he had experienced among those who set the standards of his own civilization. "The idea of a 'cultured' individual is merely relative," he continued: this was an observation that echoed down the next century. "The evil as well as the value of a person lies in *Herzenbildung*"—that is, the cultivation of the heart—"which I find or find lacking here just as much as among us."

Finally, the time arrived to rejoin Marie, whose father, an Austrian Catholic freethinking physician, had emigrated to America years before, and was now a good friend of Uncle Jacobi's. Marie, whom Boas had met while their families vacationed together in Germany, had long since gone home. His ruminative letters were aimed at New York City, and so was the ship he boarded once his work was done, prepared to exchange Baffin Island for Manhattan island—one boyhood fantasy for another.

Disembarking in the fall of 1884, Boas entered the embrace of a ready-made family: a transplanted German-Austrian Jewish-Catholic altogether reform-minded group who were determined that the New World's democratic revolution would not fail—even if the promised land needed a great deal of work. Health conditions in the tenements, for example, were notoriously bad; Uncle Jacobi—Dr. Abraham Jacobi, for whom a Bronx hospital was later named—had opened the first children's clinic in the country. His friend Carl Schurz, another fire-breathing Forty-eighter, had been a campaign organizer for Abraham Lincoln and was now a determinedly pro-union journalist; a younger member of their circle, Felix Adler, had reinvented German Judaism as the Society for Ethical Culture, where prayer was replaced with campaigns for low-income housing and against child labor. For Franz Boas, there was one institution where a young anthropologist might similarly join his knowledge to his ideals, although no one yet suspected that it needed him as much as he needed it.

The American Museum of Natural History was the city's first great public institution, and it has reflected New York's contradictory spirit ever since President Grant laid the cornerstone, with a trowel from Tiffany's that was stolen as soon as he put it down. The auspicious event took place in 1874, five years after a



group of city elders, spurred by Albert Bickmore, an ambitious renegade from Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, agreed that New York ought not to lack anything that a mere provincial center like Boston had. The museum charter was approved in the Roosevelt family parlor, on East Twentieth Street, when Teddy, Jr., was eleven; the future President soon made his first donation of one bat, twelve mice, a turtle, a squirrel skull, and four bird eggs. So many other judiciously chosen bugs and shells were soon pouring in from local enthusiasts, and so many fine collections of stuffed and bottled beasts were purchased by Bickmore, as director, that the museum overflowed its original quarters, in the Central Park Arsenal, before it had fully moved in.

In the very first weeks, thousands of visitors packed the galleries, and exhibitions were quickly renewed to keep the crowds coming back. Unlike its Boston prototype, whose collections were largely reserved for the use of Harvard students, New York's museum was a chartered educational organization, with a civic mission: to help the city's toiling, tenement-dwelling, trowel-filching denizens escape the corrupting influences of city life and become civilized through an exposure to nature. Nonetheless, the trustees spent every cent of their money according to their personal desires and their sometimes quirky conception of the common good. Donated treasures like a life-sized tab-

leau of "a lion attacking an Arab on a camel" might make Bickmore grumble about a "stuffed circus" (P. T. Barnum himself contributed a stuffed baboon), but he was stuck with what he got.

The museum's move to a new, Victorian extravaganza of a building in the unpopulated reaches of West Seventy-seventh Street—nearly a mile north of the El train—turned success into an empty, echoing mistake. In 1880, a devoted trustee named Morris K. Jesup was asked to cut expenses, but he decided instead that vastly more money should be spent; and after being elected president of the museum, in 1881, he pitched in more than half a million dollars of his own. Jesup was a Gilded Age hero: a self-made man who had left school at twelve and amassed a fortune in railroad securities but who longed for the education and, it seems, the childhood he had missed—one of the lost boys in suits who helped the museum grow up. His tenure lasted a quarter of a century, during which he hired the best scientists—Joel Asaph Allen in ornithology, Henry Fairfield Osborn in vertebrate paleontology; Boas in anthropology—but also painters, sculptors, and taxidermists, who conspired to offer serious knowledge with Barnum-style flair.

For Jesup, the most exciting areas of exploration were paleontology and anthropology: dinosaurs and men. Here were still discoveries to be made, theo-

ries to be proved, and spectacular exhibitions to be mounted. Although the first dinosaur remains had been unearthed in 1818, the creatures had little impact on the American imagination until, in the eighteen-nineties, a museum artisan invented a method for boring into the fossils' fragile cores, so that whole skeletons could be displayed in dramatic poses. To further excite the viewer's imagination, Osborn, a brilliant curatorial impresario, surrounded the skeletons with murals of living dinosaurs lumbering about the earth—images that were so widely reproduced that by the turn of the century the fantastical dragons had become as much a part of American childhood as baseball or cowboys and Indians.

Indians, viewed as part of the continent's natural history, were the museum's other legendary residents. It was not the tribes of the plains or the Southwest whose arts and tools were admired and eagerly collected, however—in the museum's early years, the Sioux, the Cheyenne, and the Navajo still presented too much of a living, landowning threat—but the tribes of the Northwest Coast, from British Columbia to Alaska. These rich, long-stable societies had struck even eighteenth-century Europeans of small racial sympathy with the “natural genius” of their creative work; a century later, when disease and legal strictures had taken a formidable toll, the best ethnological museums in the world were competing for their dying arts. Albert

Bickmore had felt the importance of “salvaging” pieces of Northwest Indian art as early as 1880, and hundreds of masks, blankets, house posts, head-dresses, rattles, and spoons were transferred from the Northwest Coast to New York City. In 1883, the *Times* celebrated the arrival of an enormous, thirty-man Haida canoe, hollowed from a single cedar tree and richly painted, prow and stern. It was suspended from the ceiling of a second-story gallery, where the ferocious animal decorating its bow glared hypnotically at viewers of the nearby anthropological cases—including, the following year, Franz Boas.

“I think every day about the museum and again about the museum,” Boas wrote to Marie during his first stay among the Northwest tribes: a three-month trip, financed by Uncle Jacobi in 1886, that provided him with outstanding expertise in his newly chosen field. Yet for nearly a decade he remained an anthropological nomad, picking up whatever work he could: writing news summaries for the magazine *Science*—a stint that lasted long enough for him to marry Marie, in 1887—travelling to Vancouver or Berlin for short-term projects, teaching at Clark University, in Massachusetts, and finally making his way to the Chicago fair. He had become a published authority on a range of subjects—Indian linguistics, mythology, art—but, even so, when Jesup approached, Boas was not his first choice: at thirty-seven,

he was considered too young and, doubtless, too much of an upstart. Jesup's offer depended on sharing the burden of Boas's salary with Columbia, and the dual appointment was confirmed only when a mysterious donation toward his salary was pledged. (This was one debt to Uncle Jacobi that his nephew never learned of.)

Boas began work at the American Museum of Natural History in 1896, a year of straitened finances for the city and, as it turned out, no funds at all for the museum's department of anthropology. The collection was already so large, as Jesup saw it, that nothing was needed except well-labelled displays. This did not bode well for Boas in his new position: unlike Jesup, he was a believer in “steady empirical work”—field work, omnivorous collecting, details—and claimed to distrust theories. But within a year he had initiated a project that Jesup called “the greatest thing ever undertaken by any museum”—a theory of national importance to prove.

Jesup described it in the museum's annual report as “the theory that America was populated by migratory tribes from the Asiatic continent”—that the Bering Strait was once a land bridge, by which an Asian people later known as “American Indians” had entered the New World. The fact is now well accepted, and Boas had no doubts about it at the time. But what an impetus the inquiry provided, what adventures, and what bounty! For five years, the anthropologists, archeologists, and linguists of the Jesup Expedition fanned out over an area that extended from northwestern America to northeastern Russia. And from the moment the first New Yorkers (including Boas) arrived in British Columbia, in 1897, until the last hired Russians left Yakutsk, in 1902, they accumulated enormous knowledge about a multitude of cultures that were destined to vanish from the earth. In addition, they accumulated thousands of objects—huge totem poles were shipped to New York on special flatcars—and Boas wrote the first volume of the planned expedition series, on “Facial Paintings of the Indians of Northern British Columbia.”

Trouble began when the rest of the volumes came due. It was to be expected that reports from outer Siberia should take time in getting written (some took



thirty years). It was not expected that Boas would refuse to write a volume summarizing the results of these fantastically expensive voyages, or to provide an answer to the theoretical question he had posed. Like some anthropological Leonardo, he was obsessed with learning and entirely uninterested in setting his knowledge into finished form. Jesup was furious, and the venture that bears his name has reasonably been judged a failure. When it was over, there was a mass of information but no new understanding of just what the links were between the languages and myths and physiognomies of the peoples who were partitioned when glaciers melted into a sea.

But the maligned expedition led to a singular triumph: the museum's Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, which opened in 1899, and in which revolutionary scholarship was embellished with a touch of the German Romantic poet. Boas's notion of the hall was based on the Dresden Museum's display of the Sistine Madonna: deep shadows and a nearly religious sense of mystery. Plaster mannequins were used to suggest life and scale, and to provide displays of face painting, cooking, and weaving. The collection's most extraordinary objects required no aid in being brought to life: the fierce ceremonial masks with their glowering eyes set the place ablaze—as they still do—with the indignant energy of captive spirits.

It was Boas's organization of his treasures that caused a stir. Traditional exhibits grouped artifacts according to type—baskets, utensils, musical instruments—and in lines of development from simple to complex. Boas had announced his opposition to such displays: to understand what an object meant, the viewer must see it as its creators saw it, not in a pattern imposed by outsiders. His plan accorded each tribe an exhibition area of its own. As always with Boas, details concealed a broader argument: in this case, against seeing human culture in evolutionary terms, rising from the "primitive" to a summit on which the inventors of the evolutionary scheme inevitably perched. Boas liked to point out how recent most civilizations were and how time had revealed "innate" abilities: what would ancient Egyptians have said about prospects for the backward white race? The exhibition was filled with small rebellions—

the display of face painting showed that Indian artists freely used both "primitive" (geometric) and "advanced" (realistic) styles—and it was meant to reshape the visitor's idea of culture itself.

It was hard enough to reshape the ideas of the trustees. Jesup complained that he could not make head or tail out of the Northwest Coast Hall, and that Boas was far too preoccupied with research. After 1902, with the expedition completed, Boas began complaining, too: museum displays could not reflect the historical and psychological dimensions that were essential to anthropology; besides, his requests for funds—he had proposed a huge "vanishing tribes" expedition to the American West—were being denied. While the conflict brewed, Boas's work at Columbia brought him the increasing satisfactions of independence and the admiration of students who were eager to have their ideas reshaped. The blowup with the museum came in 1905, when a collection of Peruvian artifacts was installed according to the old evolutionary scheme, flouting Boas's principles right under his nose. He made an appeal to Jesup, arguing that the museum's greatest duty was to demonstrate "that our people are not the only carriers of civilization." But within weeks he angrily resigned, citing "fundamental differences of opinion." When Boas departed, he left behind what even his rivals identified as one of the greatest anthropology departments in the world; and he had raised questions, at least, regarding what the museum should teach its visitors about the family of man. In a city where more than two million immigrants arrived during the first two decades of the century, the answers were urgent.

The year Boas assumed his job at the museum, the Supreme Court's "separate but equal" ruling ushered in a wave of segregated schools, hospitals, rest rooms, park benches, and railroad cars across the country; the year he quit, a visiting Pygmy from the Belgian Congo was displayed for weeks in a cage in the primate house of the Bronx Zoo. Boas returned to the real world with a pressing sense of the need for justice, and with a profound frustration at the science available for its pursuit. In

May, 1906, at the request of W. E. B. Du Bois, he addressed the Negro student body of Atlanta University. Du Bois had asked him to speak on "the African physique," but Boas worried that he did not have evidence for the desired "new approach" to the physiology of race—all he could certainly prove was that the bigots had no evidence, either.

He spoke, instead, on the history of pre-colonial African civilizations, referring to German scholarship on iron production and political organization and Benin bronzes. He compared the position of Negroes in America to that of Jews in Europe, and advised the students to take hope in what African people had accomplished before they were enslaved. "Impartial scientific inquiry tells you to take up your work among your race with undaunted courage," he assured them—although he could cite no studies to support his claim. The same year, Boas tried to raise funds for an African Museum, and for a nationwide study of the American Negro. Failing in both efforts, he set out to produce the necessary evidence for a new approach himself.

In 1908, Boas persuaded members of a congressional commission studying immigration that he could determine once and for all whether assimilation worked to produce desirable citizens. He had already published a critique of America's preferred system of measuring human craniums, reporting that the revered "cephalic index"—a number derived from the skull's width in relation to its length, and considered an infallible sign of ethnic identity—was so easily altered by extraneous factors (a person's height, for example) and so inconsistently applicable to different groups that it often did not "express any important anatomic relation" at all. No one appeared to take this view into account, however, when Boas proposed to measure some heads himself. For the next three years, he and a team of assistants measured nearly eighteen thousand recent immigrants and their children; the results, announced in 1911, were a shock to all. The cephalic index of the American-born children of every group—Southern Italians, East European Jews, Hungarians, Poles—had altered from established figures by a miraculous millimetre or two in length



or width; the longer the parents had been in this country, the greater the difference, while European-born children of the same families showed no comparable change.

Just three years after the phrase "the Melting Pot" had been affixed to the city by the playwright Israel Zangwill, Boas proved that the most feared of the foreign hordes were adapting toward a new physical type that might one day be known simply as "American." Boas himself drew no such radical conclusions; he simply provided the numbers that allowed others to do so and suggested that "when these features of the body change, the whole bodily and mental make-up of the immigrant may change." He did not venture any reasons for the changes, although in the excitement of his announcement it seemed that everyone else was wondering: Could it be the nutrition? The air? Democracy?

Boas, of course, had a shining example of the powers of assimilation always before him. For all his worldly causes, he was a devoted family man: thick stacks of loving letters to and from his children—there were five in all—fill the Boas archive of the American Philosophical Society. The children spoke German and English, practiced no religion, and were unconditionally American: in one letter to his older brother Ernst, then serving as a U.S. Army doctor, fifteen-year-old Heinrich insists on being called Henry, rebels against short pants, and rhapsodizes over the jokes in "Huckleberry Finn." Boas himself belonged to no religious organization—Ernst reported that his father objected even to his joining the Society for Ethical Culture—but was a founding member of the Germanistic Society of America. Several scholars have questioned whether his assimilationist ideals were a product of his ambivalent identity as a Jew; others (perhaps less scholarly) have asked whether his ideals were not merely a front for Jewish advancement (approximately one-third of those measured in his survey were of "Hebrew" origin). Near the end of his life, Boas observed that "my ideals have developed because I am what I am and have lived where I have lived." But, however personal the origins of his thinking, his intellectual program was based on an unswerving German Enlightenment belief (and was

there anything that more clearly marked him as a German Jew?) in the common humanity of all.

There were no Indians or Negroes included in the immigration survey, for obvious reasons. But, the same year, rounding off a sweeping attack, Boas published a "Handbook of American Indian Languages" and a volume of lectures titled "The Mind of Primitive Man," both of which mixed arcane anthropology with ideological dynamite. In the first systematic study of Indian grammars ever written, Boas refuted prevailing claims that "primitive languages" lacked the means for abstract thought; the minds that produced these languages were no different from our own. The even more incendiary lectures began with his speech of 1894, and went on to examine current racial theories, concluding, "There is every reason to believe that the negro, when given facility and opportunity, will be perfectly able to fulfill the duties of citizenship as well as his white neighbor." As in Atlanta, Boas saw the Negro's social plight as related to that of Jews and other "so called 'lower' types," whom many Americans feared were creating a "mongrel" nation. He argued that, biologically speaking, mongrelization served a nation well: the populations of Germany, Italy, and Britain were demonstrably mixed. All races could contribute to human progress "if we are only willing to give them a fair opportunity."

There were many who were not so willing, at least not on American soil, and they were not all necessarily villains. Unionists feared an influx of scab labor; guardians of the separation of church and state feared the new masses' old-fashioned religious ties. But there were also those who deliberately exacerbated every fear and prejudice. The most viru-

lent attack on "the Boas propaganda" appeared in 1916 in a volume designed by its author, Madison Grant, to rouse Americans "to the overwhelming importance of race and to the folly of the 'Melting Pot' theory." Grant was a founding member of the New York Zoological Society—and the man responsible for the Pygmy being locked up in the zoo—who had extended a passion for preserving bison and caribou into a mania for preserving the "Nordic race." A wealthy lawyer with no scientific training, he reacted to Boas's immigration study with angry letters to politicians ("Dr. Boas, himself a Jew, in this matter represents a large body of Jewish immigrants") before hitting on the idea of a book addressed to an entire nation.

"The Passing of the Great Race" is essentially one long apocalyptic warning: "The immigrant laborers are now breeding out their masters and killing by filth and by crowding as effectively as by the sword." Grant was soon the recognized "high priest" of American racism, as Gunnar Myrdal later called him: our Count Gobineau, our Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and as instrumental in the formation of Nazi ideology as either of these more sinister figures. (Grant's family destroyed his papers after his death, but he is reported to have displayed a letter from Hitler that referred to his book as "my Bible.") In America, Grant's assertions were widely taken for scientific fact, because his book carried the stamp of approval of the American Museum of Natural History.

Grant had become a museum trustee thanks to his good friend Henry Fairfield Osborn, the curator of paleontology, who was appointed president of the board in 1908, after Jesup's death. Osborn's inauguration took place in the library of his uncle, J. P. Morgan, and the splendor of his relations lent his scholarship an added glow. To Osborn, this was his proper due: a tall and legendarily pompous figure, he was as famous for dropping other people's names as he was for quoting himself. Although he and Boas were mirror opposites in many ways, each was devoted to a practice of science with calculated political effects. Shortly after assuming his new position, Osborn informed Grant that he intended to make the museum a



HOW-TO

On the cliff you've just left
 a puff of snow rings like smoke.
 I didn't know snow did that.
 Nor that a man could fling
 himself from that height
 and mean to land alive.
 Soon, in love's descent,
 I will learn how to drag
 this image from my screen.
 You, against your will, to survive.

—Eliza Griswold

“positive engine” for the “propagation of socially desirable views,” views that he made clear by finding Grant a publisher for his book and by writing an appreciative preface that raised its ravings to the height of his own professional esteem.

Boas reviewed “The Passing of the Great Race” in *The New Republic* in January, 1917. He graciously began by noting the debt that New Yorkers owed its author for his services to the city’s scientific institutions. It was only because the views that Grant expressed were so dangerous, particularly in being introduced by the great museum’s eminent President Osborn, that the reviewer regretfully felt compelled to expose the author’s faulty conception of heredity, his dogmatic assumptions, his lack of evidence, his numerous inconsistencies, his substitution of prejudice for conclusions, and his delusion of an aristocracy of race. In support of his own positions, Boas cited his immigration-commission findings of 1911, their confirmation by a European émigré anthropologist in Washington, and—so fundamentally alone was he still in America, after thirty years—the work of a contemporary German scientist named Eugen Fischer. In the midst of the Great War, Boas still hoped that German science might help America out of its racial quagmire, a hope that was not as far-fetched then as it seems now. He had visited his family in Germany many times, and he was well aware that even the liberal stronghold of anthropology had given way to Aryan hysteria. But he had faith in the work of men like Fischer, who had earned his fame with a book claiming that racial in-

terbreeding promoted genetic health—in 1913, a year when twenty-nine American states had laws against interracial sex or marriage, and men like Grant and Osborn appeared to control the science of the future.

The science was called eugenics. The link between biology and authoritarian politics was set when, in 1883, Sir Francis Galton founded a discipline “which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race”; in 1910, he outlined a notably British utopia called Kantsaywhere, in which citizens obeyed strict laws of procreation while displaying a permanently courteous disposition. Galton, a cousin of Darwin’s, was intent on undoing the damage that misguided societies had wrought in allowing the survival (and reproduction) of the less than fit. His doctrine spread quickly, initially finding as much support among progressives as among reactionaries—George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and even Winston Churchill were early believers—in England and, very soon, in Germany. By 1912, however, when the First International Congress of Eugenics took place, in London, only the late-starting American contingent had converted theory into practice: eight states—including New York, Connecticut, and California—had passed laws authorizing sterilization for epileptics, criminals, or the insane. Madison Grant was a fervent champion of such laws; his book held out the promise of their extension to “weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless racial types.” The primary targets of

the American eugenicists were not, after all, in institutions; they were in the city streets, outbreeding their masters and killing by their crowding and filth, and more were arriving every day. And so the Galton Society, established by Osborn and Grant in the American Museum of Natural History in 1918, took the undoing of U.S. immigration policy as its first command.

Meeting once a month in Osborn’s office, the society’s members worked out racial interpretations of the recently invented I.Q. tests—higher test scores among immigrants who had been in the country longer were taken as proof of a flow of increasingly stupid immigrants—and rehearsed their testimony for the House Immigration and Naturalization Committee. In 1921, the museum was host to the Second International Congress of Eugenics. Osborn, in the opening address, made the challenge to Boas perfectly clear: “We are engaged in a serious struggle to maintain our historic republican institutions through barring the entrance of those who are unfit to share the duties and responsibilities of our well-founded government.” Further, those now judged unfit would be unfit forever, since it was a matter of scientific fact “that education and environment do not fundamentally alter racial values.”

The battle was joined with forces far from equal: one shabby classroom tucked into Columbia’s journalism building and a few scholars struggling for an unendowed department’s scanty funds (Osborn cheerfully referred to Boas’s “comparatively obscure and uninfluential position”) against a rich and politically seductive institution. Osborn, who disdained anthropology as “the gossip of the natives,” had early on authorized a few touches to Boas’s Northwest Coast Hall—the Haida canoe was filled with plaster warriors, brooding totem poles were set against the pillars—and then let it settle under dust. Now he contradicted everything it stood for with his own Hall of the Age of Man, which was a fixture of the museum until well after the Second World War. Featuring fossils and casts and Maxfield Parrish-like murals of cave-men, the hall presented a grandly orchestrated illustration of the proposition that the human races had been created as separate species, and ascended from dark

beetle-browed brutes to the fair artists and chieftains of the North. It was left to visitors to locate their own place in the line.

By the early twenties, Boas seemed to be up against the will of a nation. The newly revived Ku Klux Klan had acquired an estimated four million members, and according to *The Saturday Evening Post* there were two books on race and immigration that "every American should read": Grant's "The Passing of the Great Race" and his disciple Lothrop Stoddard's "The Rising Tide of Color." Stoddard was neatly summarized by F. Scott Fitzgerald in "The Great Gatsby" when thick-skulled Tom Buchanan harangues Daisy and Nick from a book Tom calls "The Rise of the Coloured Empires, by this man Goddard." As Tom explains, "The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged." And he adds, in words that must have made the walls at Columbia weep, "It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved."

In forty-one volumes published by the immigration commission, the significance of Boas's head-study findings was continually contradicted and easily lost. Boas testified before the House committee, but so did Grant and Stoddard. On April 3, 1924, Osborn published an article entitled "Lo, the Poor Nordic!" on the editorial page of the *Times*, in which he quoted his own remarks from the museum's eugenics congress and concluded with a paean to the Nordic race—which he described as having migrated to Italy just in time to become the ancestors of Raphael, Leonardo, Dante, and Columbus. A letter of response from Boas appeared on April 13th, under the heading "Serious Flaws Are Suspected in Professor Osborn's Theories," in which he warned, with an almost discernible tremor, "There is grave danger that on account of Professor Osborn's position as President of the American Museum of Natural History his words may be taken as expressing the final conclusions of science." But the battle was over. The headline on the front page that day read "IMMIGRATION BILL IS PASSED INTACT."

A law passed only three years earlier had reduced admissions to three per cent of every "nation" in the U.S. population, based on the census of 1910. The new

bill reduced that figure to two per cent, and even this small number was limited to nations already present in 1890, a date chosen to keep the most despised immigrants out. The Johnson Immigration Bill—the brainchild of Albert Johnson, a Washington State Republican and the honorary president of the Eugenics Research Association—provoked a bitter House debate, with cries of "wops" and "dagos" crossing with charges of "un-American" discrimination. Although the demands of labor and the weary postwar spirit of isolationism played their roles in pushing the legislation through, much of the argument was couched in biological terms. (One of the bill's chief opponents, Representative Emanuel Celler, of New York, wrote to inform Boas that he was considering bringing three skulls onto the House floor—Nordic, Mediterranean, and Negro, indistinguishable from one another—in an attempt to subvert "biased knowledge.") The bill passed in the House by a vote of 326–71 and in the Senate by 62–6; it was signed into law by President Coolidge with the words "America must be kept American."

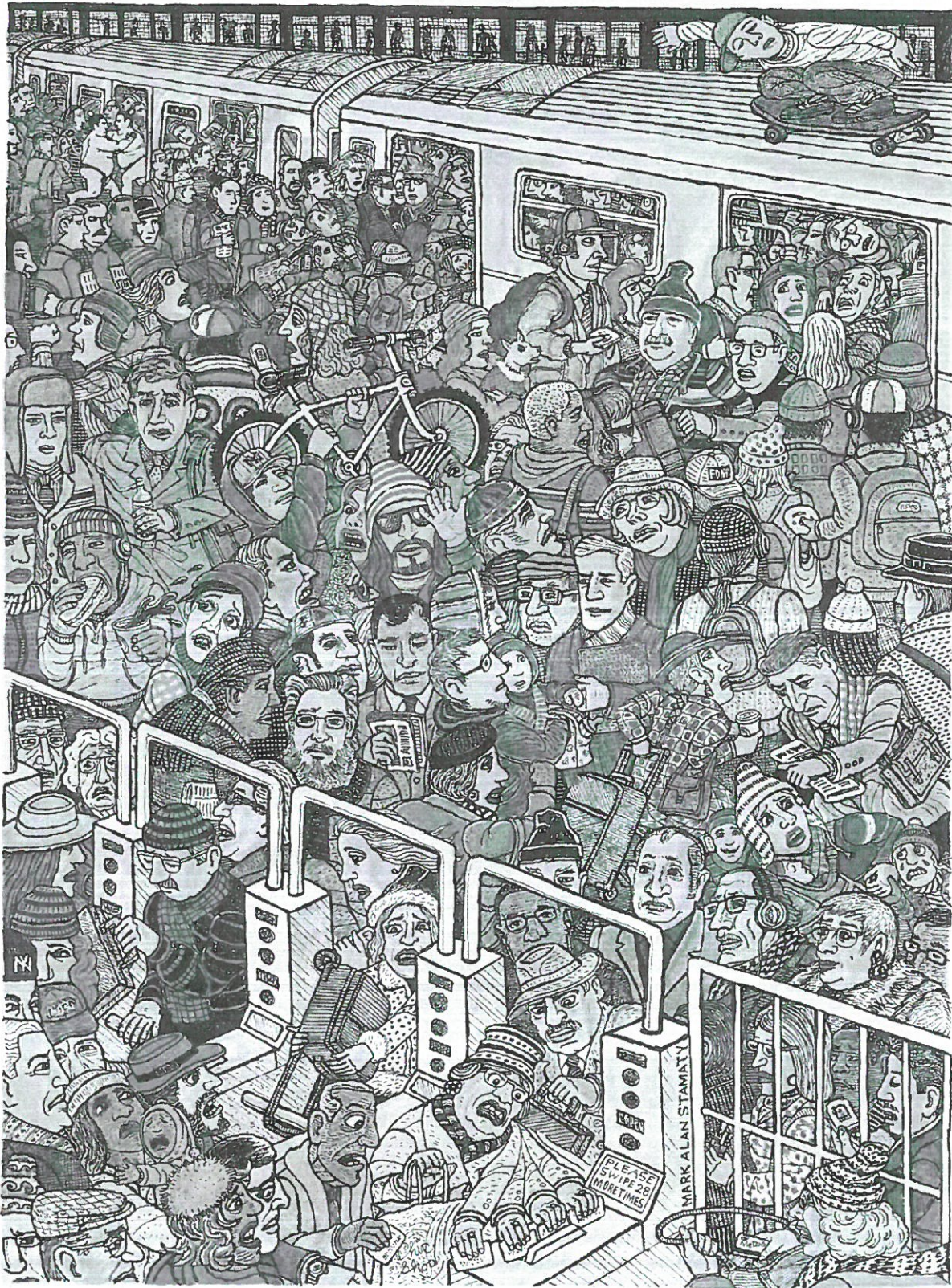
As a result, all immigration from Japan was ended. (Chinese had been excluded since 1882.) Immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was reduced to a fraction of its former level; Jewish immigration was cut nearly to zero, with no allowances made for political refugees. No one then had a glimmer of the tragic consequences that ensued just over a decade later, when the Nazi government, taking American racial and sterilization laws as a model, went beyond anything that Osborn or even Grant had foreseen—although Stoddard lived to become a minion of Goebbels. When the bill was passed, Osborn wrote to congratulate Johnson on one of the most important steps "in the whole history of our country." Boas was back in the *Times* before the end of the month, under headlines reading "SCIENTISTS AT ODDS ON SUPERIOR RACE" and "NORDIC CLAIMS DISMISSED." But he knew that he could no longer fight alone.

We used to argue vigorously as to whether or not Jews had a 'chromosome' for social justice," Margaret Mead recalled of evenings after her Barnard classes, when she and her friends would make cardboard signs for an end-

less sequence of meetings and liberal speakers. Mead had gone to Barnard as a sophomore, in the fall of 1920, starved for "the life of the mind," and she discovered it most vividly during her senior year in the classes of Franz Boas: the first teacher "who elicited my total respect." At sixty-two, Boas extended warm paternal feelings toward his students—the closest called him Papa Franz—but he was nevertheless an intimidating figure: surgery for cancer had left him with half of his sabre-scarred face paralyzed (Mead thought that from the other side he still looked like a handsome young man) and had made his heavily accented speech even more difficult to understand. Yet he was lecturing constantly, writing streams of articles, toiling for causes ranging from the N.A.A.C.P. to the devastated postwar Berlin Philharmonic, and supervising a small number of students in a series of carefully coordinated projects that amounted to a comprehensive attack on the biologically fixated status quo.

The first generation of Boasians had been launched: Robert Lowie (whose book "Primitive Society" helped convert the young Claude Lévi-Strauss to anthropology) and Alfred Kroeber (whose social vision animated the novels of his daughter Ursula Le Guin) had gone off to teach at Berkeley. They concentrated on the preservation of American Indian cultures—at Columbia, Boas had adapted his hopes for a museum-funded "vanishing tribes" project to the work of individual students—but the new generation had wider prospects in mind. Melville Herskovits was determined to study African culture despite prevailing wisdom that the subject didn't exist. (He went on to found the first department of African studies in America, at Northwestern University.) Ruth Benedict set out to study Indian ethics. And to Mead, at twenty-three, Boas assigned the youth-obsessed twenties' hot topic of adolescence. Mead accepted the assignment but refused to work among the Western tribes, who had been studied so often by then that every Indian family was reputed to include an anthropologist. She insisted on going to the more exclusive territory of the Samoan Islands, and the fact that this geographic shift required no change in subject shows how deeply Boas had become involved

STAND CLEAR BY MARK ALAN STAMATY





with a single overarching idea, embodied in the question that he posed for Mead: "Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to civilization?"

Nature or nurture? Galton had lifted the terms from Prospero's description of Caliban ("A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick") and, like Prospero, he came down hard on the side of biological destiny. His view gained wide support when, at the turn of the century, the physical mechanisms of heredity began to come to light, with the recognition of Mendel's laws of dominant and recessive genes, and with the shattering news that acquired traits cannot under any circumstances be inherited; that is, our genetic material is sealed off from everything we learn. This discovery was a catastrophe for liberals who believed in the human capacity for development, and many thinkers (including Freud) refused to accept it as final. Boas had the wisdom not to attempt a refutation—there was, of course, no science that would support such an attempt—yet his data about immigrant children had opened minds to possibilities that less "scientific" claims would not have inspired. The project he gave to Mead had similar implications: the perturbations of puberty, like cranial structure, were accepted as a biological absolute.

At the same time that Boas obtained a stipend for Mead, he won Herskovits enough money to study African-American physiognomy—more skulls—on the streets of New York. By 1925, Harlem's population was verging on two hundred thousand; the great migration from the South and the closing of the

gates to intruders from overseas made it possible at last for Boas to fund a study of the "African physique," as Du Bois had requested two decades before. In May, 1925, Mead, preparing for her trip, agreed to sublet her Morningside Heights apartment to Herskovits. It is a sign of how entangled the problems of the here and now were with the group's exotic anthropological horizons that she had to renege on the offer and extend frantic apologies upon learning that her "race-discriminating tenement" did not rent to Jews.

While Mead was interrogating Samoan girls about their sex lives, the newest member of Boas's brigade in New York, Zora Neale Hurston, was learning to measure heads. Hurston had enrolled at Barnard just after Mead left, in the fall of 1925, on a scholarship she won by dazzling a school trustee at a dinner for promising "New Negro" writers. Adept in the lyrical speech of her all-black Florida home town, and gifted with a cajoling wit, Hurston was strikingly qualified to make the "good collections of Negro folklore, and particularly of Negro song," that Boas had long wanted—not just the content but the nuances of style and meaning that only an insider could catch. The task would require that Hurston return to the South as soon as she finished her courses. In the meantime, she made the ideal street-side researcher for Herskovits's study of Negro physiognomies: who else, as her friend Langston Hughes pointed out, would have had the nerve?

And so, for much of the summer of 1926, Hurston stood on a Harlem street corner with a large pair of calipers, ask-

ing passersby for permission to measure their skulls. Although I.Q. tests had begun to replace head measurements as a means of racial classification—and Boas was already studying bias in the tests—the methods of physical anthropology had not changed. Hurston's job was to measure families, and deduce the effects of the new urban environment with mathematical precision. Although Boas's files contain several letters from the laboratory that produced the specialized measuring instruments—headspanners, spreading and sliding calipers, anthropometers, and something called a Gleitzirkel—informing him of continual delays due to "inconceivable, exasperating and very numerous difficulties" in calibration, he betrayed no hint of concern. Either he believed in the inevitable recurrence of the kind of changes he had found sixteen years before or he knew—as most scientists involved with measuring heads had always known—that numbers were produced by theories, and not the other way around.

His own numbers had received an unexpected scientific explanation, and from an emphatically unbiased source. Writing in a German eugenics textbook, Boas's friendly colleague Eugen Fischer—whom he had cited in opposing Madison Grant—confirmed the findings of Boas's head study and, as a physician, suggested fluctuations in the endocrine system as a likely cause. Whatever his eugenical lapses, Fischer appeared to be holding up the better side of German science—in 1922, a competing German eugenics text featured a photograph of a bust of Grant—and when, in 1927, he wrote of his appointment to run the new Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, in Berlin, Boas welcomed an international partner in the essential investigation of "the influence of environment upon bodily form."

Heredity or culture? In the twenties, people were discovering that they lived in a culture—movies, pop songs, best-sellers—the way Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* discovered that he had always been speaking prose. Negro culture? American culture? It was the Great War, of course, that had shaken belief in a monolithic European culture that had failed to avert the European savagery.

Although Boas argued for the recognition of plural cultures, he suggested not that all human achievements were equal—he was too imbued with Beethoven and Schiller—but that the range of intelligence and virtue ran the gamut about equally in every group. Thus each person can be judged only as an individual. The challenge that remained was to demonstrate the power of culture in shaping lives. It was nature versus nurture with the scales reset: against our sealed-off genes, there was our accumulation of collective knowledge; in place of inherited learning, there was the social transmission of that knowledge from generation to generation. “Culture” was experience raised to scientific status. And it combined with biology to create mankind. Boas sent his students off to learn how the delicate balance worked. And then Margaret Mead came home and wrote a best-seller that turned American culture upside down.

With an introduction by Boas and a cover showing a bare-breasted girl rushing to a tryst with her lover beneath tropical palms, “Coming of Age in Samoa,” published in 1928, was both an aphrodisiac and a call to arms. By ignoring Mead’s rather harsh criticism of the nonsexual aspects of island life (“A low-grade moron,” she wrote, “would not be hopelessly handicapped in Samoa”) and dwelling on her tales of teen-age girls choosing strings of lovers with light-hearted ease, Americans conspired in the fantasy of a society in which there was no adolescent angst, no unhappy marriage, no jealousy, no Oedipus complex, and no emotional suffering of any kind. The utopian aspects of Mead’s book were as gratefully seized on as the sex: if nurture could so conclusively trump nature, then we, too, could be anything we wished—sexually free, unneurotic, even happy—just by changing the cultural rules. Mead confessed to her publisher that she had pushed speculation “to the limit of permissibility,” and critics have since claimed that she pushed it well beyond, blaming Boas for teaching her—and, by extension, millions of readers—to see human possibilities that are not there.

Although Boas had not expected such extreme results, Mead’s utopia served as another welcome tool to per-

suade people of human malleability. The eugenicists’ immigration victory had been followed, in 1927, by a triumph in the Supreme Court, when Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes approved compulsory sterilization for “unfit” citizens with the famous words “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” (Like Mead’s “low-grade moron,” Holmes’s “imbeciles” derived from supposedly precise categories established by the new I.Q. tests; that year, hospitals throughout the country began to perform the operations.) Against such legal sanction, Mead’s case for culture seemed to amount to little more than paper and ink, as did Boas’s own attempt to reach a popular audience with a book entitled “Anthropology and Modern Life” (1928), in which he argued that culture—“the community of emotional life that rises from our everyday habits”—was more significant than race or origin in building a nation.

This marked the culmination of a lifetime of arguments, and, at seventy, Boas was wearing down. Two of his children had died in quick succession: musical Gertrud, of polio, in 1924, and Heinrich—sweet “Huckleberry Finn”-loving Henry—in a railroad accident the following year. In 1929, Boas’s wife, Marie (“Mama Franz” to his students), was hit by a car while he was at a conference in Chicago, and died before he could get home. The following Christmas, Boas returned to his Northwest Indian haunts, writing to his son Ernst that he could not bear his empty house. He spent summers in Germany; his sisters were alarmed by the number of votes being cast for the Nazis, but he clearly thought that sense would prevail. Was there less reason to have faith in Germany than in America? Hitler had written admiringly of U.S. immigration policy in “Mein Kampf,” but the Germans had passed no national or racial immigration restrictions; German eugenicists had gained government approval only for a program of consensual sterilization. Who could have been sure, as the thirties began, which of these economically plummeting nations would go racially mad?

The Third International Congress of Eugenics was held at the American Museum of Natural History in August,

1932. Those curators who might have protested lacked either the power or the will to do so. Henry Fairfield Osborn had been president for twenty-four years, and under his aegis enormous treasures had accumulated, in a physical area more than twice the museum’s original size: an ornate marble entrance in honor of Teddy Roosevelt was being planned, and the new Hall of African Mammals, with its central procession of elephants—a tour de force by the taxidermic genius Carl Akeley—made as thrilling a spectacle as the ever-beloved dinosaurs. In the midst of this edifying people’s palace, an exhibit related to the conference displayed photographs of native Africans designed to reveal their “racial backwardness,” posters listing U.S. anti-miscegenation laws, charts illustrating the inheritability of antisocial behavior, and other eugenicist toys.

Boas stayed in Germany all that summer. He published a brochure based on a speech that he had given at his alma mater in Kiel, entitled “Race and Culture.” In Berlin, he encouraged his old friend Eugen Fischer to prepare a study of the “changes in head index” of local descendants of East European Jews, presumably to demonstrate their degree of assimilation. Back at home in the fall, suffering from a weak heart, he carried out from his bedside various battles for the rights of Canadian Indians and for the Scottsboro Boys. He

was too frail to go to meetings, or to keep charge of the department at Columbia. Mead later wrote that these might well have been his final months had it not been for Hitler’s assumption of power, in January, 1933, which roused a sense of anger so tremendous that the old man rose from his bed and, as she put it, “flung himself back into the world.”



Even before 1933, Boas had recognized that the Nazi movement was, as the historian Léon Poliakov has written, “an episode in the history of anthropology,” and that the way to break its political grip was to refute its science. To this end, he became a whirlwind of production: pamphlets distributed in the German underground, a trip to confront Nazi representatives at a Paris conference in 1937 (he was nearly eighty),

a long series of articles—and an even longer series of desperate letters seeking employment for anyone, it seems, who could get out. He asked Einstein to help an émigré dentist complete his training. (Einstein sent a check.) Boas's sisters and their families managed to escape, but when his old teacher from the Jewish school in Minden asked for help there was nothing he could do; the quota was filled, he was told, for a long time to come.

The ideas he was fighting were all too familiar. One of the first pieces of Nazi legislation, passed in June, 1933, was the Law for Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring, a sterilization law virtually copied from the model that a Galton Society member, Harry H. Laughlin, had drawn up while serving as the House of Representatives' Expert Eugenics Agent. The debt was acknowledged by proud eugenicists of both countries. By now, though, the American movement was coming apart. Boas's students were finally approaching a kind of critical mass, with "cultural anthropologists" heading all the major university departments and most professional organizations in the country. These were the voices that newspapers quoted and that people wanted to hear, as the Depression led many Americans to realize that poverty was not a hereditary flaw and that anyone might fall to the bottom of the heap. In 1931, Boas was elected president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt won the Presidential election with a campaign based on optimistic strength—the opposite of the doom-crying eugenicist credo—and on concern for the country's "forgotten men."

Madison Grant, feeling the momentum ebb, decided to write another book, and "The Conquest of a Continent," with an introduction by Osborn, was published by Scribners in 1933. The publicity stated that Grant, like "Herr Hitler" in Germany, offered important national solutions. Boas protested, again citing the research of Eugen Fischer; but this time Grant was virtually ignored. *Foreign Affairs* dismissed the book in four words: "Science submerged by opinion." Ruth Benedict, in the *Herald Tribune*, called it "a trifle ridiculous," and barely distinguishable from

Nazi propaganda—which is what it soon became. Public revulsion against Nazi doctrine ultimately finished off the eugenics movement; in 1936 Boas appeared on the cover of *Time*, a national hero.

The only change in the German edition of Grant's book, issued in 1937, was the inclusion of an introduction by Eugen Fischer, in which he attacked "the Jewish anthropologist and ethnologist, Franz Boas," and asserted that racial characteristics were inalterable and "the sole determining basis of history." Fischer turned out to be an excellent example of how the human soul may change under pressure of a new environment. His early liberal opinions caused Nazi officials to withhold Party membership until 1940, but he proved his new loyalties in countless ways: as head of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, which Boas had welcomed two decades before, he directed "racial hygiene" courses for S.S. doctors, provided expert testimony on life-or-death issues of racial heritage, and oversaw experiments in genetic pathology, focussing particularly on twins. On his retirement, in 1942, Boas's onetime hope for German science left the institute to his handpicked successor, Otmar von Verschuer, and to Verschuer's former graduate student Josef Mengele.

At a time when every theoretical barrier between the barbarous and the civilized was collapsing—confirming Boas's rejection of cultural hierarchies in a way that broke his heart—New York was seeing fewer immigrants arrive than in any period since the eighteen-thirties. The only expandable if unofficial quota was for those exceptionally accomplished individuals who were able to inspire heroic efforts of patronage, paperwork, and endurance. The young anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss met the Surrealist potentate André Breton on what Lévi-Strauss called a "convict ship" (seven beds, hundreds of desperate passengers) sailing to New York in the spring of 1941. Lévi-Strauss—a rabbi's grandson who owed his American "invitation" largely to Robert Lowie—was soon scouting Third Avenue antique shops with Breton and Max Ernst (whose son had been sponsored in America by Boas) in search of the "primitive art" prized by anthropolo-

gists and Surrealists alike. But Boas was the first person Lévi-Strauss wanted to meet in America, and before long he was part of the Columbia circle as well. The first exercise in the comparative method of French Structuralism was Lévi-Strauss's probing of the correspondences between his groups of friends—the masks, the myths, the roots of language—and its first manifestation the articles he began to publish in New York. The movement really ought to have been called Manhattan Structuralism.

When Lévi-Strauss made his way to the Northwest Coast Hall at the American Museum of Natural History, it had heard hardly a footstep in decades. The whole museum had lost its lustre: money for expeditions had long ago dried up, and after Osborn's retirement, in 1933—he died in 1935, after a blissful tour through Nazi Germany—the place seemed adrift. But for Lévi-Strauss the hall was a sleeping kingdom, waiting to be reclaimed. "There is in New York a magic place where all the dreams of childhood hold a rendezvous, where century old tree trunks sing or speak," he wrote in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1943. He compared the hall's totem poles to the pillars of a temple in a poem by Baudelaire; the disquieting masks evoked Chartres, mixed with Halloween. Beyond aesthetics, Lévi-Strauss was moved to write of the "carnal bond" he felt with the work of these people, whose numbers were so small in relation to their achievements, and of their tragic near-extinction. The unspoken entanglements of the modern anthropologist have never seemed more poignant. Lévi-Strauss soon settled down to write a book—his first major work—about "kinship structure" in cultures ranging from the Kwakiutl to the Chinese, even as his own kinship ties kept him in racial exile, and his own culture was annihilating the people who truly shared his carnal bond.

On a freezing day in December, 1942, Boas, aged eighty-four, hosted a luncheon at the Columbia Faculty Club for the French anthropologist Paul Rivet, an old friend whose anti-Fascist activities had forced him to flee Paris just ahead of arrest. Lévi-Strauss, who sat beside Boas, described him arriving wearing a fur hat that looked as though it dated from his time with the Eskimos, sixty years before. There was wine, and talk of earlier days



and of the war. Boas had reportedly just uttered the words "I have a new theory about race" when he suffered a heart attack and toppled backward in his chair. It was Lévi-Strauss who bent to lift him up, making for a nearly winged allegory of intellectual transference. Rivet, a former military doctor, pronounced the old man dead.

Boas died without knowing how the war would end, or what would become of the country that won its magnificent victory with an Army still segregated by race. "It is an arduous work that is before you," he had warned Du Bois's students at Atlanta University in 1906. "Do not let your path deviate from the quiet and steadfast insistence on full opportunities for your powers." Nearly half a century later, when the Supreme Court, in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, unanimously overrode its "separate but equal" decision and ordered the racial integration of public schools, Boas's ideas were fully present in the courtroom. Thurgood Marshall's winning argument for the N.A.A.C.P. relied on testimony about the effects of segregation on Negro children by the sociologist Kenneth B. Clark, who had trained with Boas at Columbia. Chief Justice Warren's decision cited Gunnar Myrdal's comprehensive 1944 volume "An American Dilemma," which derived its account of racial history from studies that Myrdal had commissioned from Melville Herskovits, Ashley Montagu—doctorate from Boas, 1937—and other Boas disciples. Precise credit for the historic reversal was assigned by angry segregationists, who decried the overpowering influence of "the Boas cult" and claimed that "the ghost of Boas" had served as a powerful tenth justice on the Court.

In New York City, straight through the nineteen-fifties, schoolchildren packed off on trips to the American Museum of Natural History were shown displays of "human races by linear arrays running from apes to whites," as Stephen Jay Gould—who was one of those children—recalled. But change was coming even to the House of Osborn, under curators like William K. Gregory, Margaret Mead, and, finally, Gould himself, who was seduced by the dinosaurs of Central Park West into becoming a paleontologist, and who, as Honorary Curator of Paleontology, demonstrated that

punctilious Darwinian science was fully compatible with Boasian ethics.

The museum's dark old days have been erased. Osborn is now remembered more for introducing the nation to the *T. rex* than for his racial politics. Madison Grant is memorialized in a display of Alaskan caribou that bear his name—*Rangifer arcticus granti*—but hardly anyone knows anymore who he was. (A scrupulous dissertation by Jonathan Peter Spiro awaits a publisher. Boas, although lacking a full biography, has been studied by many superb scholars, among them George W. Stocking, Jr., Douglas Cole, Ira Jacknis, Julia E. Liss, Lee D. Baker, and Aldona Jonaitis.) Sixty years after Boas's death, the museum is so much his institution, ethically speaking, and so fully reflects the city that has grown around it, ethnically speaking, that its current curator of anthropology, David Thomas, was the first to publicly express shock and pain when the *Times* revealed, in October, 2002, that Boas's foundational 1911 head-study findings had been declared erroneous, and that Boas stood accused of shading his data to achieve the desired results.

It was hardly the first such allegation. This time, two anthropologists restudying Boas's records—more than five hundred pages of figures, which he published in 1928—announced that the effects of the new environment were "insignificant"

and the differences between the children of immigrants born in America and those born in Europe "negligible in comparison to the differentiation between ethnic groups." Boas himself had noted the smallness of the changes observed; the shock at the time was that there was any change at all. Seizing on the charges, Boas's traditional political opponents were merrily issuing cries of "scientific fraud" when, in 2003, another group of anthropologists restudying the data refuted the indictment, announcing that "on the whole, Boas got it right" about the transforming effects of environment on biology. Nearly a century after Boas's original study, the contesting experts are still arguing about head shape and its implications for the human ability to grow beyond categorically fixed—racially, ethnically fixed—limits. Boas was uncontestedly right, however, about the social and cultural potential of the human beings he studied, an explosive potential for which his millimetre-thin findings served as a sign and a promise, and which his life's work helped to fulfill. American society has been reaping the benefits for decades. So let them argue. Let the anthropologists argue, let the politicians argue, let even the bigots argue. It's a free country—in part, thanks to Boas. Thanks to him, even if the heads did not change in a significant way, the world did. ♦



"I've got some skills—I'm just not sure they add up to a 'set.'"