



Perilous Ideas: Race, Culture, People [and Comments and Reply]

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SIDNEY W. MINTZ LECTURE
FOR 1992

Perilous Ideas

Race, Culture, People¹

by Eric R. Wolf

Ideas about race, culture, and peoplehood or ethnicity have long served to orient anthropology's inquiries and justify its existence. As both offspring and critic of the human condition, anthropology bears a special responsibility to examine the commonplaces of its thought and the fighting words of its speech and to subject them to resolute analysis. The present contribution to this task suggests that we must remind ourselves of the importance of Boas's critique of typological thinking about races as we confront the intensifying racisms of our time, take much greater account of heterogeneity and contradictions in cultural systems, and recognize that ethnicities come in many varieties and to call a social entity an "ethnic" group is merely the beginning of the inquiry.

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Each endeavor to understand humankind works with a set of characteristic ideas that orient its inquiries and justify its existence, and for anthropology ideas about race and culture and—more recently—about peoplehood or ethnicity have played that guiding and legitimizing role. Franz Boas, who stands at the beginning of American anthropology, taught us to be especially attentive to issues of race and culture. It is appropriate to address these issues today not only because 1992 marks the 50th anniversary of Boas's death but also because one of the important lineage segments in anthropology reckons intellectual descent from Franz Boas to Alexander Lesser to Sidney Mintz, whom this new lecture series is designed to honor. I will attend especially to the concept of race, because it remains a major source of demonology in this country and in the world and anthropology has a major obligation to speak reason to unreason. This, too, is something that Mintz, Lesser, and Boas have insisted on and that we must heed. Thus, I intend to focus on the concept of race, notions about the biological variability of the species and about the possible implications of this variability. I will then consider the concept of culture, especially the idea that humans depend heavily on behavior that is learned, not inborn, and that this capacity for learning has fostered the proliferation of quite varied bodies of thought and action. Finally, I will take up briefly the notion of peoples, envisaged these days as social entities—ethnic groups or nationalities—that are conscious of themselves as owners of distinctive cultural traditions passed on along the lines of shared descent.

These notions are of course not only exclusive professional property; they form part of the stock of ideas of much wider publics who discuss them in more extended and less academic terms. This was true even when they first came into usage. "Race" has been traced to *generatio*, "generation," from the Latin *generare*, "to beget." "Culture" was first used to talk about cultivating a field and only later transferred to *cultura animi*, "the cultivation of minds or souls." Greek *ethnos* once designated just a "bunch," without reference to descent or political cohesion; Homer spoke of a flock of animals or a swarm of bees, as well as a bunch of people (Benveniste 1969:90). Used in our time, moreover, these words carry a heavy freight of shame and fury. Contrary to the popular saw that "sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can never hurt you," these words—as Morton Fried said—can injure mind and body. The race concept has presided over homicide and genocide. To accuse someone of lacking culture, being a *bez-kulturny* (as the Russians say), a red-neck or hayseed, a *jibaro* or *indito*, someone who has not been to the right schools, is to declare that someone lacks cultural capital and should not be allowed into the Atheneum or the Escambrón Beach Club. And one of the ways of manifesting ethnicity is now to don a camouflage suit and grab an AK47.

This relation between professional dialect and more general discourse needs to be understood as part of the wider interplay between anthropology and other kinds of public understanding. The discipline did not spring

Athena-like from the head of Zeus; it comes out of the cauldrons of conflict that cooked up much of the toil and trouble of past centuries, and it responds—must respond—to these forces even when it strives for professional distance and dispassionate neutrality. It is precisely because it is both offspring and critic of our condition that it bears a special responsibility to examine the commonplaces of our thought and the fighting words of our speech and to subject them to resolute analysis. I hope to contribute to this task here.

Each of these three concepts—race, culture, and ethnicity—has a societal background, and that background has implications for how we conceptualize and use them. I think of ideas as “takes” on the phenomena of this world and as instructions about how to combine these takes to ascertain their connections or, contrariwise, to hold them apart, to beware of asserting linkages that are false. I also think that particular takes are prompted by background conditions and limited by these conditions. Thus Marx put forward the interesting argument that Aristotle was unable to conceptualize a common denominator in all human labor because, as a member of a slave society, he thought of the labor performed by slaves and that performed by freemen as being qualitatively different. “The riddle of the expression of value is solved when we know that all labor, insofar as it is generalized human labor, is of like kind and of equal worth; but this riddle can only be unriddled when the notion of human equality has acquired the fixity of a popular conviction” (1946:31). One could not think of different kinds of work done as forms of labor in general as long as slaves and peasants, warriors and priests were thought to perform qualitatively incommensurable kinds of work, but rendering labor power universally exchangeable by means of money as a common denominator permitted this new way of thought. Similarly, there could probably be no anthropology of religion or study of comparative religion as long as the religions of believers, heretics, and heathen seemed wholly incommensurable and as long as the symbolic value of an object or an act was thought to be an intrinsic, essential, inseparable aspect of it—God’s truth and not man-made hocus-focus, in the trenchant phrasing of Robbins Burling (1964). Only when it becomes possible to divorce signifier from the signified, symbol from referent, can one talk about Christian communion and elite Aztec cannibalism as convergent forms of communication with the divine.

I am therefore interested in *what* the concepts of race, culture, and ethnicity allow us to think. I am also interested in *how* they allow us to think. It is one thing to be impressed by the spirituality and holiness (*baraka*) of a Berber holy man and quite another to ask how this spirituality is constructed, portrayed, engineered—what kinds of credentials, knowledge, and skills of performance are required to be a convincing *agurram*. Some concepts are essentialist; they are takes on what are assumed to be the enduring, inherent, substantive, true nature of a phenomenon. Other concepts are analytic, suspicious of holisms, interested in how seemingly

whole phenomena are put together. Periodically raising the question of whether the unities we define are homogeneous or whether they are better understood when they are disaggregated and disassembled not only allows us to evaluate concepts we have come to take for granted; it also allows us to think better.

Race

One useful way of getting a purchase on the race concept is to trace it to the great archaic civilizations of the Old and the New World. Most of them developed models of the cosmological order in which an exemplary center—a metropolis, a mother city—occupied the pivotal point of intersection of all the directions of the cosmos, where they enacted collective rituals to maintain the order of the world and from which they deployed the power to ensure it (Carrasco 1982, Eliade 1965, Wheatley 1971). Beyond the civilizational core areas lay the lands of the barbarians, clad in skins, rude in manner, gluttonous, unpredictable, and aggressive in disposition, unwilling to submit to law, rule, and religious guidance. The Greeks and Romans saw these people as not quite human because they did not live in cities, where the only true and beautiful life could be lived, and because they appeared to lack articulate language. They were *barbarophonoi*, bar-bar-speakers (Homer *Iliad* 2.867), and in Aristotle’s view this made them natural slaves and outcasts. Beyond the lands of the known barbarians, uncouth and threatening but identifiable through contact in trade and war, lay the country of “the monstrous races,” whom the Roman Plinius catalogued for medieval posterity, both Christian and Muslim: men “whose heads grow beneath their shoulders” (Shakespeare), people with one eye in the middle of their foreheads, dog-faces, ear-furlers, upside-down walkers, shadow-foots, mouthless apple smellers, and many more (Friedman 1981; for Islamic parallels see Al-Azmeh 1992).

These hierarchically deployed and ranked schemata may be compared with those of more egalitarian tribal people. For example, the Brazilian Yanomami, according to Albert (1988), also begin their sorting of people with a local cluster, in their case of four or five local groups that intermarry, ally with each other in war, and attend one another’s funerary rites, in which all partake of each other’s vital substance by drinking down the ashes of the honored dead in plantain soup. Among these allies one can expect sorcery but of a garden variety manageable through ordinary shamanistic cures. Beyond this core of allies live active enemies whom one does not marry, with whom one does not exchange or feast, and from whom one is separated first by raiding and counter-raiding and second by warpath sorcery (raids in which pathogenic substances are supposedly deposited in each other’s camp). Still farther on lie the settlements of potential enemies who are said to perform aggressive sorcery at a distance (see Chagnon and Asch 1973), and beyond these live little-known though inimical Yanomami whom one fears not so much for their sorcery as

for their inadvertent potential killing of one's alter ego destiny animals, which like to graze in these far-off forest glades. In this scheme all people are seen as equally benevolent and malevolent and similar in comportment and bodily form; it is their differential location on a spatial continuum that identifies them as friends or hostiles. The dominant civilizational schemata, in contrast, assign differential valuations to salient distinctions in life-style and physical appearance, as well as to the geographical zones in which these life-styles and bodily forms are manifest, from the true and beautiful centers of urbanity to the demonic hilly crags and caverns of the monster world. In addition to external barbarians and misshapen people, there were also civilizational schemata for ranking internal "others"—exemplary representatives of the civilized way of life against *hoi polloi*, "the many." Proximity to rulership, participation in the work of the gods, projection of values and idealized styles of comportment and performance—a proximity at once geographical and social thus instituted a ranked scale of valuation from the paragons to the stigmatized.

This should not be taken to mean that everybody in civilization marched in serried ranks according to the dominant schema at all times. The Roman Tacitus wrote his *Germania* in part as an indictment of profligate Rome in contrast with supposedly still pristine and virtuous barbarians—flogging moral decay and family values is an old theme in history. Similarly, there were strains in Chinese Taoism and Buddhism that offered a critique of rulership and moral corruption by advocating a retreat into the "mountains and marshes" inhabited by non-Chinese indigenous peoples or inverted the schema of civilization to look for "blessed lands" of refuge and immortality beyond the confines of the Middle Kingdom (Bauer 1976). Yet the centripetal tripartite scheme held fast for long periods of time, if only because it corresponded to a tangible, experienced distribution of social power in geopolitical space.

Within the context of Europe, Christendom inherited the schemata of Classical antiquity and transformed them to fit its own logic and understandings (see Jones 1971:381). The trichotomy of civilized, barbarians, and monstrous humans was transformed into one of the faithful, the unredeemed, and the unredeemable. Slavs, Germans, Vikings, and Saracens could be made to fit more or less neatly into the barbarian category; a subcategory of really vicious barbarians, very close to monsters, was constructed to account for the pastoralists on horseback who came charging out of the East to threaten the integrity of Christendom—Huns, Avars, Magyars, Mongols, and Tartars. The Arabs constituted a special problem, because they appeared to be civilized and yet had been seduced by Mohammed; the solution was to declare Mohammed a false prophet and the Muslims Christian heretics (Jones 1971:392). The advent of the Turks once again simplified the classificatory problem; they were retrofitted into the subcategory of vicious barbarians, in which guise they kept appearing before the gates of Vienna and most recently as *Gastarbeiter* in the Germanies.

Beyond the barbarians still lay the lands of the monstrous races (Friedman 1981). Opinion on these strangely formed creatures was divided. St. Augustine thought they were still capable of salvation, no matter how odd in physical form or language, as long as they were "rational mortal" creatures, hence human and descended from "the one who was first created," Adam. Others saw them as fallen creatures, misshaped by sin or guilt, "displaying on their bodies what the forebears had earned by their misdeeds" (Vienna Genesis, A.D. 1060–1170, quoted in Friedman 1981:93), probably descendants of Cain or of Noah's son Ham, who had sinned against God and were thus supposedly fit for enslavement.

Although Ham was occasionally represented as the forefather of the Saracens, of the natives on islands of the Indian Ocean, of "ungentle churls" (Friedman 1981:102–3), most sources associated him with Ethiopians or Africans. This association gained intensity as a rationalization of the slave trade when Africa replaced Europe and the Levant as the main source of supply for coerced labor. In the early Middle Ages, it had been northern and eastern Europe that sent slaves to the Islamic Near East. In the later Middle Ages, the current reversed, and Europe increasingly imported slaves from the Russian-Turkish borderlands around the Black Sea. In 1453, however, the Ottoman Turks cut off this source of supply with the conquest of Constantinople, and their move into North Africa soon barred Europeans from easy access to the eastern Mediterranean. Slavery existed, but it was not then color-specific. By the mid-15th century, however, the Portuguese had expanded their trade for slaves down the West African coast as far as Ghana, and from then on Africa south of the Sahara became a main area of supply both for Iberia and for the New World (Greenfield 1977, Phillips 1985, Verlinden 1970). One of the main causes of the intensification of the trade was undoubtedly the rapid decline of the American Indian population in the wake of the Spanish and Lusitanian conquests and the increasing demand for labor on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean about which Sidney Mintz has written so eloquently and so well.

As Spaniards debated whether to enslave the Indians of the Americas, they also resurrected the arguments about the nature of the monstrous races of long before. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argued that the Indians were natural slaves because they were more likely beasts than men, wicked in their lusts, and cannibals to boot. Bartolomé de las Casas, arguing in contra, replied in St. Augustine's terms that they were rational and hence redeemable.

It is important to remember how long the biblical texts continued to provide the main paradigms for the interpretation of human events, how long it was held that the world was only 6,000 and some years old, and how long scholars of repute as well as laypersons clung to the belief in human descent from Adam and Eve and in the tales of Noah and his sons and of the Flood. In the 15th century, maps still showed how Noah redistributed and repopulated the world by dividing it among his

three sons: Japheth got Europe, Shem Asia, Ham Africa (Friedman 1981:93). In the 18th century the great classifier Linné, who was willing to group humans together with apes and monkeys as *anthropomorpha*, still asserted his belief "on divine testimony" in the descent of all humans from Adam and Eve, while Johann Blumenbach made the Caucasian, the "white," race "primary among all other races, because he believed in human descent from a common stock through Noah, who landed on Mt. Ararat in the Caucasus, and because he thought that the Georgians of the Caucasus might have been the first post-diluvians" (Bernal 1987:219).

With Linné and Blumenbach we are, however, into race making of the modern kind (see Slotkin 1965:170, 180, 190–91). Linné categorized the races of *Homo* into Americans, reddish, obstinate, and regulated by custom; Europeans, white, gentle, and governed by law; Asians, sallow, severe, and ruled by opinion; and Africans, black, crafty, and governed by caprice. This classification exhibits some enduring characteristics of raciology—its obvious bias and the conflation of physical traits, temperament, and political-moral behavior. Blumenbach, however, was no obvious racist. He held that humans were descended from the first couple created by God and differed from animals in their possession of reason. He also argued specifically against the imputation that Africans were basically different in physique and deficient in rationality. He understood, moreover, that human varieties "so sensibly pass into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them." Yet he did set up the Caucasians as the original race from which the others sprang by variation. Although he himself did not interpret variation as degeneration, others did. Once the game of racial classification began, permutations and combinations thereafter multiplied the number of races, eventually to the point of absurdity.

Raciology was marked by several convergent lines of thought. First, scholars believed that by sorting people into physical types one could gauge their temperamental and moral dispositions. Second, if some types could be shown to be more pure or better endowed than others, then one could fit them as superior and inferior elements into the larger cosmic scheme of "the great chain of being," understood as the God-given hierarchical chain of organisms that reached from the lowliest creatures to those most perfect in their physical and psychological refinement (Lovejoy 1964:59). Thus, the different human races could be placed upon a ladder to perfection, with the "gentle whites, governed by law," clearly superior to the other *anthropomorpha*. Third, the ranking of races from those least perfect to the most exalted gained ground because it corresponded to the ways in which many people began to comprehend the reshuffling and reorganization of society in the transition from the 18th to the 19th century. Scholarly literati began to interpret national histories as accounts of struggles among races, with the victors showing racial superiority over the vanquished or the defeated rising up in righteous wrath against their corrupt and effete overlords. (On history writing during the periods of romanticism and national-

ism, see Barnes 1963:178–238; on France, Blanckaert 1988, Huss 1986; on England, Hill 1964, MacDougall 1982, Morgan 1988, Simmons 1990; on Germany, Mosse 1964, Barnes 1963. German "historicism" drew on romantic political economists, legal scholars, and sociological folklorists, as well as on Prussiacentric historians.) At the same time, colonial expansion and imperialism carried European flags to the four corners of the globe and fueled ideologies that portrayed the European victors as energetic, dynamic, active, masculine, forward-looking, and goal-oriented and the vanquished as backward-looking, low in energy, passive, feminine, sunk in sloth and living for the moment, retarded, and regressive and thus in need of being lifted up by the standard-bearers of progress.

Bio-moral thinking and the increasing tendency to understand history as a struggle of races for dominance received reinforcement from the development of new orientations in physiology. This new physiology hoped to overcome the old conceptual split between mind and body by focusing on the way the brain and the nervous system connected up all organs and muscles in the body (Jordanova 1986). This new focus would, it was hoped, provide a materialist link between brain functions and temperament. It drew many physiologists to pay attention to the work of Franz von Gall, the initiator of phrenology (McLaren 1981). In the early years of the 19th century Gall taught that mental activity had a physical basis; that this physical basis was the brain; that the different parts of the brain had different functions; and—most relevant for the development of raciology—that these functionally specific components of the brain in turn influenced the shape of the skull that contained the brain, with the result that measuring bumps on the head would reveal clues to the head-owner's personality and character. Predictably, Gall's books were prohibited by the church for trying to do away with the hypothesis of a soul separate from the body; yet precisely for this reason, phrenology also appealed greatly to anticlerical believers in true science. Generalized to entire populations of skull-bearers and elaborated through ever more sophisticated techniques of measurement, the new science of phrenology generated an avalanche of craniometric studies that strove to correlate cranial morphology with assumed racial characteristics. The apotheosis of this effort was reached with a scholar who eventually applied more than 5,000 separate measurements to the skull.

Despite doubts and occasional criticisms, however, this century-long attempt to define the varieties of humankind as enduring morphological types, each equipped with a stable bio-moral essence, perdured well into our times. It reached, of course, a new paroxysm with National Socialist "racial science." Yet even in the United States, this "old physical anthropology" remained in place until the mid-1950s, when Hooton and Dupertuis at Harvard University still typologized 9,521 Irish males into nine separate morphological types and labeled each type a distinctive and separate race (Hunt 1981:344–45). Only then did a more dynamic physical anthropology begin to replace the old racial essentialism

with studies of genetic distributions, environmental adaptations, growth and development, and evolutionary processes. In 1962 Frank Livingstone (1962:279) confidently announced that “there are no races, there are only clines”—that is, gradual changes in traits and gene frequencies displayed by members of a species along lines of an environmental transition. Yet some have not yet heard or have opted to treat the issues with decorous silence. It should give our colleagues pause that the one recent systematic book on the subject, Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), was written by an evolutionary biologist and not an anthropologist.

In the United States, it was primarily Franz Boas who raised these questions, often against staunch professional opposition. Having demonstrated an unexpected variability in head form in successive generations of European immigrants, he then not only attacked essentialist typological thinking in human biology but assailed in similar terms the resulting conflation of history, biology, physiology, psychology, linguistics, and ethnology. His driving conviction that correlated phenomena do not need to be causally related led him to the conclusion that “any attempt to explain cultural form on a purely biological basis is doomed to failure” (Boas 1940[1930]:165).

Culture

Just as Boas had disaggregated racial typologies and scrupulously severed considerations of race from considerations of culture, so he argued against the common presupposition that each culture constituted a distinctive and separate monad *sui generis*. Since all cultures could be shown to be interconnected and continuously exchanging materials, no culture was due to “the genius of a single people” (Boas, quoted in Stocking 1968:213). Since cultures were also forever breaking up and differentiating, it was not very useful to speak of culture in general; cultures needed to be studied in all their plurality and particular historicity, including their interconnectedness. Moreover—and this was a major Boasian point—cultural integration could not be assumed; where it was asserted, it had to be demonstrated. “Have we not reason to expect,” he asked (Boas 1940[1933]:447), “that here [in so-called primitive cultures] as in more complicated cultures, sex, generation, age, individuality, and social organization will give way to the most manifold contradictions?” Given both the heterogeneity and the historically changing interconnectedness of cultures, he did not see how attempts to develop general “laws of the integration of culture” could “lead to significant results” (p. 267).

These arguments had wider implications. It had become quite common, especially in Germany, where people opposed the universalist rationalism of the French Enlightenment, to assert the uniqueness of each people and of its *Volksgeist* or “folk spirit.” That spirit was believed to be anchored in passion and emotion, not in reason, and manifest in art, folklore, and language. Edu-

cated Germans especially found it attractive to accept such unifying and holistic perspectives on other cultures, because they had been imprinted with admiration of one such model of the *Volksgeist*, the *paideia* of ancient Greece propounded by the art historian Johann Winckelmann (see Bernal 1987: esp. chaps. 4 and 6; Butler 1958). Rewritten and reimagined versions of Greek history and life became a mainstay of upper-middle-class aspirations and the foundation of an education celebrating Hellas as a wholly integrated culture that had known perfection and was thus worthy of emulation. A major tradition of intellectual thought and work—extending from Wilhelm von Humboldt through Hegel, Nietzsche, Matthew Arnold, Frobenius, and Spengler to Ruth Benedict—has employed the guiding notion of an ideational holism at the root of culture.

To this kind of approach Boas was opposed. He understood that breaking down cultures into atomistic traits and studying them as aggregates of such traits compounded from here, there, and everywhere would not yield useful comprehension of how they might hang together. But he did offer the beginnings of a strategy for thinking about how this might work by referring to what he called “psychic processes.” His chief example of such processes was the notion of “secondary interpretation,” which implied that people build up complex networks of connotations upon initial denotations and that it was incumbent upon anthropologists to examine these “psychic processes” in constructing the internal interdigitations of a culture.

After an interlude that focused on culture-and-personality studies, American anthropologists began again, in the 1950s, to address some of the Boasian themes and queries, this time with a concern for the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of culture. They wanted to look at culture not as a typological given but “as a constitutive process.” They also hoped to direct their studies toward a better understanding of how people create or modify their collective representations and how traditional modes of representation might prompt or constrain these efforts at rendition. In pursuing these interests, they drew heavily on studies of literature and linguistics, focusing especially on the mechanics of symbolic representation through the use of metaphors, metonyms, *synechdoche*, tropes, genres, and deictics. Ohnuki-Tierney (1981) has characterized these endeavors in terms of a professional division of labor. Cognitive anthropologists have dealt primarily with the ways in which sense images and sound images can be combined to produce concepts or “memory codes.” Symbolic anthropologists, for their part, have concerned themselves mostly with how memory codes generated in different domains are combined and coordinated through the elaboration of analogy codes and then how these combinations are given condensed representation in the form of icons. Both processes—the construction of memory codes and the elaboration of analogy codes—need to be studied together to understand how people arrive at cultural orderings of their worlds.

Such cognitive and symbolic strategies have indeed

yielded much work that is rich in description and evocatively integrative. These studies go some way toward engaging Boas's problematic about *how* ideas in culture are brought into association with each other—the *how* of association and coherence but not yet the *why*. The whys still elude us. Anthropologists have worked with a number of different models to represent organizational armatures around which cultural forms could be said to form—a framework of social structure, a basic personality structure, a cultural ecological core, a Marxian productive mode dialectically combining infrastructure and superstructure. But all these approaches rely on defining the basic armatures or cores in terms that render culture secondary, as filigree or ornamentation, rather than acknowledging its strategic work in laying down the culturally particular and yet potent terms of personhood and gender, descent and authority, rank and rulership, class and race, nature and the supernatural. Treating culture as secondary also recreates, time and again, the seeming contradiction between earthbound material processes and the free-floating zigzags of the mind.

Anthropologists have also taken seriously Boas's point about oppositions and contradictions in culture but have done little thinking about how these heterogeneous and contradictory perspectives and discourses can intersect, how divergent interests and orientations can be made to converge, how the organization of diversity (Wallace 1961) is accomplished. Notions of a common cultural structure underlying all this differentiation sound a bit too much like a little cultural homunculus built into everyone through the process of socialization or a Maxwell's demon capable of sorting divergent messages to create negative entropy and order. I suspect that cultural ordering requires leadership, control, influence, and power, but the phenomena of power wielding in the cognitive and symbolic sphere are poorly theorized, and thinking on these topics usually proceeds quite separately from inquiries into cultural meaning.

Peoplehood/Ethnicity

Although anthropologists talked much of race in the last century and then increasingly of culture in this one, ethnicity emerged as a hot topic only at the beginning of the sixties. This happened, I submit, for good reasons. "Ethnicity" addresses in ways that "culture" does not the fact that culturally marked entities form parts of larger systems. It was only rarely that the older literature about culture contact and acculturation raised questions about power differentials in discussions of cultural borrowings from one culture to another or of the modification of existing cultures by novel introductions from outside. Furthermore, the new emphasis on ethnicity fastened on the ways in which such groups and entities arise and define themselves as against others also engaged in the process of development and self-definition. There is hardly a study of an ethnic group now that does not describe how the locals use "agency" to "construct themselves" in relation to power and interest. This is, I think, much to the good. It transcends

the bland, power-irrelevant relativism of much of the talk about "culture." It moves us a considerable distance away from essentialist perspectives on culture toward a constructionist, compositional point of view. I suspect that "culture" is composed and recomposed of diversely shaped elements, much as Boas saw it, rather than like a dense tapestry imbricated with repetitive standardized designs. At the same time, much of the discourse about agency and construal strikes me as unduly voluntaristic, like the "little-engine-that-could" of American children's literature—the little locomotive that can accomplish feats of strength through the application of will power. To quote an older anthropologist, "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please." There is too much talk about agency and resistance and too little attention to how groups mobilize, shape, and reshape cultural repertoires and are shaped by them in turn; how groups shape and reshape their self-images to elicit participation and commitment and are themselves shaped by these representations; how groups mobilize and deploy resources but do not do this "just as they please," either in the course of mobilization or in the wake of the effects they so create.

Resource mobilization is easiest to perceive when our eyes are fixed on political and economic resources, which, notoriously, are embedded in relations of power. But it can also be observed in the way cultural repertoires are differentially distributed within a culture-bearing population. Some symbolic codes and ways of enacting them are monopolized by dominant elites through their privileged access to state and economic apparatuses; they constitute what Pierre Bourdieu has called "cultural capital." Other symbolic codes and pantomimes, less highly valued or not valued at all, belong to groups of lower ranks and statuses, who also exercise less social power. There are ongoing struggles over the distribution and redistribution of such high-profile symbolic goods, and success or failure in these struggles has painful or exhilarating effects on peoples' self-definitions.

There are also historic changes in how ethnicity is understood out there in the nonacademic world and how ethnic claims are advanced that need to be confronted and recognized. There has been a marked shift in definitions of ethnicity from racialist phrasings to formulas of cultural distinctiveness, coupled with a stress on how difficult or impossible it is for people of different cultures to live together in one city, in one region, or in one nation-state. There is a shift from the idea of common descent as defined by hereditary biological essence or a hereditarily exclusive gene pool, as under the "old" racism, toward the idea of common descent as a transgenerational vehicle for the transmission of an authentically rooted culture. "We have roots *here* by virtue of descent—you others have your different way of life, rooted elsewhere, not here." This novel combination of culturalism and ethology Verena Stolcke (1992) calls "cultural fundamentalism," a new and more virulent way of staking out ethnic claims to precedence and power. This occurs precisely at a time when an ethnic division of labor grows more intense worldwide and when transna-

tional migration is moving ever larger numbers of people across national frontiers. My point is once more a Boasian one—that claims to ethnicity are not the same everywhere and at all times. They have a history, and that history—differentially stressed in different situations and at different points of conjunction—feeds back in various ways upon the ways in which people understand who they are and where they might be at any given historical point in time.

Conclusion

It is Franz Boas's enduring legacy to have made us think more clearly about the issues posed by race, culture, and peoplehood/ethnicity. This thinking poses a challenge to us now and to an anthropology of the future. We have taken note of Boas's critique of typological thinking about races; we must remind ourselves of the importance of his contribution as we confront the intensifying racisms of our times. What anthropologists tend to relegate to the junk pile of their professional history remains live tinder in the world beyond academe. We should also not turn our backs on physical anthropology but support its transformation into a more contextually aware human biology that can engage the development of human bodies in growth and maturation, reproduction and mortality, illness and health, and interaction with the changing conditions of our worlds. In studies of culture we need to take much greater account of heterogeneity and contradictions in cultural systems and to explore the ways in which this differentiation produces a politics of meaning and cultural construction and not merely automatic repetition of inherited forms. In studies of ethnicity we can welcome the changes of perspective that place cultures within larger intra- and interconnected systems but note also that this makes of cultures a problem and not a given: a culture is a changing manifold, not a fixed and unitary entity. It also means that ethnicities come in many varieties and that to call a social entity an "ethnic" group is merely the beginning of the inquiry rather than the implementation of it. As larger macrosystems come in many shapes and sizes, so do the ethnic groups subsumed by them. This seems especially clear at the moment, when notions of cultural particularity have become major ideological weapons in political strife. We have learned quite a bit in anthropology, but we are nowhere near the end of the task. A lot remains for all hands to do.

Comments

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For the past several years I have been attempting to explicate the theoretical premises of Boasian historical par-

ticularism, constructing an argument that Boasian theory not only exists but continues to characterize much of the anthropology done in North America. As a historian of North American anthropology, I ground my argument primarily in published and unpublished documents about the work of Boas and his first generation of students. The argument is inseparable from my disciplinary practice as an Amerindian linguist/symbolic anthropologist.

In this wonderful and deceptively simple paper, Wolf articulates his relationship to the Boasian tradition. He distinguishes between "lineage segments," the personal intellectual genealogies of individual anthropologists (Boas to Lesser to Mintz and, of course, to Wolf himself, or Boas to Voegelin to Hymes to the ethnographers of communication among whom I count myself), and the "kin group" or "school," a social collectivity. Post-Boasians of quite diverse lineage descent have some things, some ideas, in common. Wolf states them elegantly, in a form both personal and generalizable.

Perhaps most significant, the Boasian tradition is ideationally based. Wolf's title speaks of "perilous ideas," and "peril" evokes a sense of danger and difficulty but also of challenge and responsibility, turning anthropological ideation into anthropological ideology. Wolf's "ideas" have consequences in the world (and he is utterly clear that most of the world lies outside the discipline of anthropology). We cannot take for granted that our theorizings will, or should, remain within the ivory towers of academia. Anthropologists who discard outmoded racisms, static culturologies, and incommensurable ethnicities have the further obligation to critique their continued use in the larger world of politics and human interaction. Words, ideas, have enormous capacity for harm—especially, in Wolf's view, when they appeal to emotion over reason.

Contemporary students of popular culture, cultural studies, etc., often choose to dismiss the disciplinary autonomy and historically constituted professional expertise of anthropologists. Anthropology is, in some very real sense, endangered. To survive, we must understand what the concepts of our discipline have to offer in the 1990s. Wolf ranks the organizing concepts of race, culture, and people/ethnicity in terms of their emergence in the history of anthropology. Work on what is labelled "ethnicity," beginning in the 1960s, is recent, contemporary, and still incomplete. Its relationship to older ideas remains in flux. Wolf's choice of "people" to gloss the anthropological version of the concept is, de facto, a claim for the continuing explanatory relevance to general public discourse of redefined concepts of race as biological variability and culture as diversities of learned behaviours.

Wolf is most lyrical when he offers a Boasian critique of the misuses of the concept of race in the recent history of Europe. Boas was an articulate opponent of Nazi Germany, insisting that race was a statistical category, hierarchy of racial units was untenable, and biology was inevitably and powerfully modified by cultural learning. (In line with the latter contention, Wolf suggests a cross-cultural line of evidence, comparing "more egalitarian

tribal peoples" in search of alternative constructions which would not dichotomize or rank races, cultures, and peoples.)

His argument about culture draws imperceptively on that about race. For most of the history of our discipline, the two have been defined contrastively. Wolf reads Boas to have opposed the German Romantic tradition, in which the spirit of a people produced a passionate, emotional integration of culture. Insofar as *Volksgeist* theories rationalized and supported Aryan supremacy, of course, he is perfectly correct. Nonetheless, Boas retained considerable respect for the emotional side of human life alongside the rational in the "psychic processes" which were to follow trait-based historical reconstructions and to explain them. Wolf perhaps dismisses too quickly the culture-and-personality school which pursued these connections as a mere "interlude" on the way to post-World War II cognitive and symbolic anthropology.

Wolf's programme for our disciplinary future revolves around the urgency of transcending the dichotomy of material conditions and mental concepts. Certainly, neither the naive materialism of 1960s neo-Marxism nor the polar ideas-in-isolation-from-anything-in-the-real-world idealism is viable three decades later. Wielding of power and construction of social meaning are both necessary and interrelated. Nevertheless, Wolf worries that contemporary constructions of individual agency are "unduly voluntaristic" and reminds readers that anthropologists know how to see individuals as *both* creative and constrained. Moreover, ethnonationalism and ethnic group claims to power have their "virulent" side, just as did the racism of an earlier theoretical era. The conclusion: eternal vigilance is the price of conceptual clarity in the bringing to bear of anthropological analysis on the essentialisms of contemporary global society.

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Wolf's brief journey into the history of anthropological concepts suffers, in my view, from a certain lack of focus. Apart from a worthy motive—to laud Sidney Mintz—this short piece traces a very long genealogy for the concept of race, a shorter one for the concept of culture, and an extremely truncated one for the notion of "peoplehood" or nationalism/ethnicity. The message is, apparently, that only the middle of the three, as constructed in the work of Franz Boas (supplemented, perhaps, by insights from the third), has any genuine merit and that with it anthropology must continue to "speak reason to [the] unreason" of racism, both biological and ethnicist. While one might wish to sympathise with Wolf's motivations, his argument is unlikely to convince any but traditional liberal anthropology's staunchest defenders, in part because although an enemy lurks beneath the surface it is never clearly identified and in part because the challenges that enemy poses both to

liberal humanism's general project of emancipation and to traditional anthropological knowledge are never seriously engaged.

This is not the place to rewrite Wolf's justificatory history of the discipline. Suffice it here to point to a particular device that allows him largely to ignore the problems inherent in the anthropological project that have been identified in recent academic discourse and, more important, in the current practices of cultural politics both in the United States and in those parts of the world where anthropologists have traditionally gone unchallenged to do their research. The device to which I refer is the attempt to write more or less separate histories of the three key concepts—race, culture, and people. This separation permits Wolf to claim a scientific high ground provided by a concept of culture and from that high ground to attack the practice of racism, ethnic chauvinism, and the like. This procedure strikes me as unsatisfying for two main reasons. First, I would want to argue at greater length but can here only assert that the differences among the discourses of race, culture, and ethnicity and the political projects that they imply are less than Wolf would have us believe and that tracing separate genealogies disguises the quite specific context within which these different expressions of Western society's understanding of otherness have arisen, namely, the continuing debates over the Enlightenment and modernity that have their origins in late-18th-century France, Britain, and, especially, Germany. Second, the separation of what are, in my view, interrelated elements of a single history at the same time allows Wolf to leave himself out of the analysis, as it were. Anthropology, with its conceptual arsenal, now becomes a body of thought that is external to the history of modernity, providing its adherents with a privileged position from which to criticise modernity without having to account for anthropology itself. If my first assertion is right, then anthropology is directly implicated in the ideologies and politics of difference that have emerged in the course of Western European and, increasingly, of a globalised modernity. It can no longer therefore merely dismiss the practice of a politics of difference in the contemporary world (the hidden enemy to which I referred above) in quite so cavalier a fashion as Wolf does here.

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12 VIII 93*

Wolf's stimulating essay invites us to think critically and historically about our concepts, and I wish to reflect here on three of his observations: his emphasis on the "leadership, control, influence, and power" involved in "cultural ordering," his reminder of Boas's insistence on the complexity and contradiction of culture, and his indication of the continuing problem of explaining cultural "association and coherence."

We are now accustomed to thinking of "order" in at

least a dual sense, “to arrange or classify” and “to command or make obey”—cognitive and political, as in the now formulaic references to a knowledge/power nexus. The perilous ideas that Wolf discusses can be seen to be ordering concepts in precisely this dual sense. We see this most clearly in his discussion of race (the most fully developed of the ideas in this essay) and the tripartite classifications of civilizational core, barbarians, and “monstrous races” characteristic of archaic civilizations, but we see it as well in his analysis of the development of each of these concepts in “cauldrons of conflict.”

We still do not adequately understand the complex interplay among anthropological ideas, the political establishment of “order,” the wider cultural ordering of complex social relations and processes, and the emergence of social and political struggles of various sorts, but we understand that the connections are intimate. A colonial administrator attempting to establish order is interested in gathering information, counting heads, and collecting revenue, but along with even the worst of architects he imagines an ordered social world of tribes, villages, and households before (or as) he attempts to construct it. A Christian mission sets out to save souls, but it imagines the fleshly carriers of those souls living in families, with houses and yards.

The role of anthropological ideas in the imagination of social and political order and the role of particular processes of social and political ordering in the formation of anthropological ideas are better recognized than they were two decades ago. But we have yet to think creatively enough about the relationship between order and contradiction; without such thinking, answers to the why questions posed by Wolf will continue to elude us. He correctly points to a central problem with most explanatory schemes—the postulation of an organizational, economic, or ecological core in terms of which culture is seen to be secondary. A related problem is that of holding one dimension of social and cultural relations constant or relatively stable while rendering another dimension dynamic and contradictory—on the one hand, an overly systematic understanding of capitalism or plow or digging-stick agriculture, on the other, the postulation of a variety of culture riddles that can be solved in terms of the requirements of the more stable core, or, in another vein, a broadly sketched “Cartesian revolution” or “modernism” in terms of which a variety of more specific and variable cultural constructs and forms can be arrayed.

We need to understand the processes of political and cultural ordering without such convenient but misleading conceptual anchoring, maintaining a sense of complexity and contradiction in each domain under consideration and exploring the mutually constituting processes of political and cultural ordering in specific social-historical fields. Thus, as Wolf insists, ideas about peoplehood and ethnicity need to be understood in terms of their conceptual histories *and* in terms of their Balkan, South African, and North American groundings. Explanation, in this view, can only be constructed in the

context of specific social, cultural, and political histories. Our perilous ideas need to be placed within and made central to the kind of comparative history and sociology that Wolf and others have pioneered.

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Wolf is as usual saying sensible things about the concepts of race, culture, and people. He entitles his remarks “perilous ideas,” meaning, I take it, that the concepts have multiple usages and histories and their use as often adds to our confusion as reduces it. I agree. I should like to develop the discussion on a peril which is referred to in his remarks but not developed fully. It has to do with the ways in which varying conceptualizations play a role in legitimating (or delegitimizing) the historical systems in which we live.

I believe that we all *today* are living in a singular historical system, a singular society if you will, that I term the capitalist world-economy. Among its basic structures have been an axial division of labor reflected in a core-periphery polarization and a political system of sovereign states bound together within an interstate system. This singular historical system has a geoculture, in my view, which means that there are norms and values which serve to legitimate the world-system as a whole and which receive some important institutional support. Of course, these values may be integrated into individual superegos to varying degrees or not at all. And there may be groups, even institutions, actively opposing these values. But a historical system cannot function unless at least some norms and values of this kind prevail (win out, on the whole, against opposition, disbelief, or apathy).

One key geocultural value has been that every state should be a nation. This is what we mean by “citizenship,” and it forms in turn the basis of the widely accepted myth of the primacy and legitimacy of popular sovereignty (within each state). A second key geocultural value has been the belief that over time it is possible to ameliorate material conditions and move in the direction of greater material equality. This belief is asserted both internally to each state and within the world-system as a whole. To the extent that people give credence to these two geocultural values, they are asserting the ideology of liberal reformism which, I would argue, has come to permeate first the core in the 19th century and then the periphery as well in the 20th (Wallerstein 1992*b*). I would further argue that liberal reformism as an ideology collapsed—in the sense that it no longer commands widespread adherence and therefore no longer serves to legitimate the system—in the 1970s and 1980s, this being the real meaning of the 1989 “revolutions” (Wallerstein 1992*a*).

What does this have to do with races, cultures, peoples? Everything. Liberal reformism as an ideology, as a

geocultural value, has the effect of pressing people to find solutions to their problems, look for salvation, place their faith in states, in their state. It politicizes people in a very specific direction. And it tends to tame any anarchistic tendencies they may feel. In this sense, it has been an enormously stabilizing doctrine and a pillar of the existing system. To the extent that this ideology has eroded, people must find their solutions, look for salvation, place their faith elsewhere than in states. I would argue that this is happening today to a degree unknown in the 19th and 20th centuries. Races, cultures, peoples have therefore a new and much more acute political resonance, one no longer contained by the belief in the centrality of the state.

But of course, as Wolf so clearly shows, races, cultures, and peoples are not essences. They have no fixed contours. They have no self-evident content. Thus, we are all members of multiple, indeed myriad, "groups"—crosscutting, overlapping, and ever-evolving. However, to make group identity politically efficacious, groups tend to strengthen boundaries, reject overlaps, demand exclusive loyalties. If this escalates, the political consequences are often very unpleasant.

There is, at the same time, another, quite different face to "groupism." Groupism is also the expression of democratic liberation, of the demand of the underdogs (those geoculturally defined as lesser breeds) for equal rights in the *polis*. This expresses itself, for example, in the call for "multiculturalism" in the United States and its equivalents elsewhere. The "universalist" response to multiculturalism—the call for "integration" of all "citizens" into a single "nation"—is of course a deeply conservative reaction, seeking to suppress the democratic demand in the name of liberalism.

These are urgent issues to which there is no easy political answer. We are in the midst of a crisis of our historical system, and the violence will much increase before we emerge from it. What can intellectuals contribute? One thing surely is a demystification of the "perilous ideas" of which Wolf speaks, but it is scarcely enough. We must also engage in the utopistics of inventing the alternative order into which we wish to enter at the end of this crisis. Classical anthropology, along with all the other social sciences, has in fact demurred at grappling directly with such enterprises. Still, as others have said, *hic Rhodus, hic salta!*

Reply

ERIC R. WOLF

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I want to thank my respondents for their comments. They make me aware that I ought to clarify the context in which my remarks were written. I am pleased that Darnell, who is one of the leading historians of anthropology, finds virtue in my account of Boas and his con-

tribution. My primary purpose was not, however, to write a history of anthropology but to honor Sidney Mintz, and to do so in a particular way. I wanted to place Mintz among the executors of the Boasian legacy and to define the importance of that legacy for American anthropology, and perhaps for all anthropology, at this moment in time.

First, Boas was punctilious and insistent about the need to distinguish among race, language, and culture. Kahn writes that "the differences among the discourses of race, culture, and ethnicity and the political projects that they imply are less than Wolf would have us believe." Yet I would reiterate that fudging the distinctions will lead us astray *if* our purpose is to think clearly about the causes of human similarities and differences. Second, Boas preached the importance of what now gets called the "four-field approach" in U.S. anthropology—the importance of looking at humans simultaneously and synoptically as biological creatures, culture carriers, and language speakers, in both the past and the present—if our purpose is to study what makes us human over the whole range of our similarities and differences. Third, Boas insisted that this was what anthropology was about. One can conceive of other purposes and other anthropologies, but—I submit—anthropology would lose sight of this central purpose at its peril. Building the study of anthropology around this purpose derives its justification not merely from motivations of intellectual curiosity (though this may suffice for some) but from our historical experience of worldwide expansion that has brought the diverse human groupings and cultures into an encompassing network of relationships. This is the global panhuman entity which Immanuel Wallerstein defines in his comment as "a singular historical system, a singular society . . . , the capitalist world-economy." The rise of this system confronts us with a task of understanding similarity and variability within the human species in ways that were never adumbrated before, either in the universalizing religions or in the philosophical endeavors of the Enlightenment.

Kahn reminds us that this encompassing global system arose out of encounters of the West with "otherness" and that these encounters were all too often fraught with mayhem and oppression. Anthropology, too, a product of these encounters, was thus never innocent but implicated in efforts at conquest and domination. Roseberry seconds the point. It is all too true. Yet, for whatever it is worth, one needs to remind oneself that if there were efforts to dominate or destroy "the other," there were also efforts to comprehend that other. Sometimes this even allowed us better to comprehend ourselves. I always thought that one of the goals of teaching anthropology was to make people aware that but for a different shuffling of the cultural, linguistic, and genetic cards they might have come to be Inuit or O'tam. Instead, at the hands of some anthropologists the existentialist "other" has now been transformed into a bugaboo so impenetrable and incomprehensible that analytic and comparative understandings of social and cultural encounters have been virtually ruled out

of court. We urgently need to develop a more sensitive and dialectically informed sense of how involvements among different societies and cultures can produce a variety of outcomes, including those of anthropological understandings.

Furthermore, just as the encounters among different "others" did not all produce the same results, it is surely also the case that not all anthropologists were alike and not all their thought processes cloned from identical paradigms. The Boasian legacy is often talked about as if it were isomorphic with American anthropology, but Boas had more enemies than friends in his own time, and my remarks were addressed to the concern that his central message is not being heard in the present. This also does not mean that Boas was right in everything he wrote and said.

Yes, the claim that the central purpose of anthropology is to address the question of what it means to be human, in all the variations and convergences that this term may entail, also constitutes a claim to "a scientific high ground." That claim asserts that there can be a general anthropology, with a unifying purpose, among other anthropologies, and that there can be general anthropologists who make that purpose their own. Wallerstein asks that we anthropologists not only cultivate our small garden but also "engage in the utopistics of inventing the alternative order into which we wish to enter at the end of this crisis." Large-scale utopias are now at a discount. Given the pessimism on the part of many about whether anthropology has a future, I would happily settle for the small-scale utopia of the discipline that Boas sketched out for us.

Roseberry makes a plea for us to be more innovative in the ways we think. He wants us to be more creative about how we use our abstractions to characterize and encompass the complexity and heterogeneity of our subject matter. This is an important message especially for those members of our discipline who have come to equate what anthropologists do with the ways in which anthropologists write. Anthropologists write, but that is not all they do. Roseberry's comment suggests that anthropology could benefit from theoretically informed discussions of its unusual mix of observation and grasp of context with operations of induction and deduction. That, too, would be carrying out the Boasian legacy.

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Calendar

- March 21-24*. International Conference on Ethnic Traditional Culture and Folk Knowledge, Moscow, Russia. Write: Organizing Committee, International Conference, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Leninsky Prospect 32A, Moscow 117334, Russia.
- April 5-11*. William Robertson Smith Congress, Aberdeen, Scotland, U.K. Theme: Smith's life, times, and work as a Semitist, theologian, encyclopaedist, and librarian and the various academic fields that recognise his influence. Write: William Johnston, Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages, University of Aberdeen, King's College, Old Aberdeen AB9 2UB, Scotland, U.K.
- April 27-30*. Southern Anthropological Society, Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Ga., U.S.A. Key symposium: Anthropological Contributions to Conflict Resolution. Write: Alvin W. Wolfe, Department of Anthropology, University of South Florida, Tampa, Fla. 33620, U.S.A., or Honggang Yang, Conflict Resolution Program, Carter Center of Emory University, One Copenhill, Atlanta, Ga. 30307, U.S.A.
- July 4-9*. Threatened Peoples and Environments in the Americas: 48th International Congress of Americanists, Stockholm, Sweden. Write: Institute of Latin America Studies, S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden.
- July 15-18*. The Social and Cultural Origins of Language, a conference in association with the Language Origins Society, Berkeley, Calif., U.S.A. Write: Bruce Richman, conference coordinator, 2200 Oakdale Rd., Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118, U.S.A.
- September*. Texts and Images of People, Politics, and Power: Representing the Bushman People of Southern Africa, Symposium and Exhibitions, Johannesburg, South Africa. Write: T. A. Dowson and J. D. Lewis-Williams, Rock Art Research Unit, Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2050, South Africa.
- October 3-7*. 2d International Congress for the Study of Modified States of Consciousness, Lerida, Spain. Theme: Ethnocognition, Shamanism, Plants and Cultural Context. Write: Institut de Prospectiva Antropológica, Av. Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 457, 4rt., 08015 Barcelona, Spain.
- November*. The Pleistocene/Holocene Boundary and Human Occupations in South America, International Symposium, Mendoza, Argentina. Write: Marcelo Zárate, International Symposium The Pleistocene/Holocene Boundary, Centro de Geología de Costas y del Cuaternario, UNMP, Casilla de Correo 722-Correo Central, 7600 Mar del Plata, Argentina.