

FRANZ BOAS AND BRONISLAW MALINOWSKY: A CONTRAST, COMPARISON, AND ANALYSIS

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To understand the individual personalities and hence the individual accomplishments of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski with regards to the field of anthropology, one must understand the schools of thought utilized in their approaches to conducting fieldwork and methodology. Through these basic understandings, one can see not only the accomplishments made, but also the lasting impressions left in and the influences they have had on the field of anthropology. To both Boas and Malinowski, the collection of data was a meticulous process. Both believed that without direct ethnographic field research, data was essentially useless. This is in direct contrast to the approach taken by many of the 'armchair theorists' of the nineteenth century. These individuals, such as Sir Edward Burnett Tylor believed that anthropologists did not need to be involved in data collection whatsoever, but that their job was to compile, organize, and classify the data in an evolutionary timeline. Tylor goes on to suggest that it is not who collected the data that is important, but rather the data itself (McGee & Warm's 2000:31).

To both Boas and Malinowski, the meticulous collection of ethnographic data by a properly trained researcher is paramount to understanding the material in its correct and intended format. Though Boas and Malinowski may have had similar views on the importance of fieldwork, they differed on the actual methodology. Boas focused on the history of a culture. He felt that only by recreating the culture from a historical perspective could the cultural phenomena be properly explained. Boas, while differing in the process of data collection, did have some consistent views on the importance of history with those of Tylor. Both believed that culture is an evolutionary phenomenon and that by tracing its developmental history one could understand and explain it, though their reasons for this thinking differed (McGee & Warm's 2000:29). Malinowski saw the reconstruction of history as a waste of time, and that the only way to properly explain a culture was to not only live among them, but also to participate in all daily activities. Through this participant observation an outsider (the anthropologist) could carry out an unbiased and completely objective study of the culture. The purpose of this paper

is to analyze, compare, and contrast the different methodologies and data collection techniques of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Both of these men were and still are extremely prominent and important anthropological figures, and their influences within the field of anthropology are invaluable. Through these explanations, one will realize and begin to understand the different schools of thought (American and British primarily) and how and why they influence perceptions still to this day.

Background

Franz Boas (1858-1942), a well known and highly thought of anthropologist is sometimes referred to as the father of American anthropology. He grew up a German born Jew under the roof of a prosperous businessman and a somewhat unusual, but civically active mother who founded the first Froebel Kindergarten. He spent the first nineteen years of his life in this environment, where he took an interest in botany and various other natural sciences (Kroeber 1943:5), which would later play greatly into his research methods. His academic career continued at universities in Heidelberg and Bonn where he studied geography and physics. He continued on to obtain his doctorate at Kiel in 1881. His dissertation, "Contributions to the Understanding of the Color of Water", dealt with the absorption, reflection, and the polarization of light in seawater (Kroeber 1943:5). Bohannon and Glazer with regards to Boas' transition to anthropology state:

A staunch believer in the value of first-hand information, he decided in 1883 to undertake a geologic expedition to investigate seawater under Arctic conditions. His year-long stay with the whalers and Eskimos turned Boas into an ethnographer and convinced him that the knowledge gained by mere observation is useless without understanding the traditions that condition the perceiver. This realization, along with the warm friendships of his Arctic hosts, precipitated what was to become his life-long interest – field research as a royal road to anthropology (1973:81).

No sooner than did Boas accept a position in geography at the University of Berlin in 1886, when he became 'inspired by a group of visiting Bella Coola Indians' that prompted the beginnings of his lifelong study of indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:81). After a year of fieldwork in British Columbia, Boas returned to Germany, married, and decided to become an American (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:81 and Lowie 1937:129). Amongst his fieldwork with the British Columbia tribes, Boas obtained his first position in the United States at Clark University in

1889. He left his position at Clark and from 1892-1894 he worked on the anthropological exhibits at the Chicago World's Fair, which he left due to personal conflicts. From Chicago, Boas moved to the American Museum of Natural History in New York (where he again was forced to resign due to further personality conflicts) and soon began teaching at Columbia University where he stayed until he retired in 1936 (Lowie 1937:129). There is some discrepancy with regard to the ability of Boas' teaching. Though he trained a generation of 'brilliant and productive anthropologists' such as A.L. Kroeber, Paul Radin, and Edward Sapir, his lectures were seen as less than desirable by many (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:82). Franz Boas was a stubborn, if not abrasive man towards many with the exceptions of his family and closest, most talented students with which he was a warm and caring man. The scars on his face are reportedly from several dueling encounters he had while in college (quite possibly due to problems associated with him being of Jewish descent), but on more than one occasion he claimed them to be from polar bear clawing (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:81).

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was born to an aristocratic and cultured family in Krakow, Poland. This environment provided him with a multilingual background and taught him a sense of worldliness. He received a doctorate with honors from the University of Krakow in mathematics and physics in 1908 (Voget 1975:513). Shortly thereafter, Malinowski was stricken with tuberculosis, and it is during his recovery time that he became enthralled with the field of anthropology. During his recovery he read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as his "first attempt to read an English masterpiece in the original", and this was his inspiration (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:272).

In 1910, Malinowski began his anthropological graduate work at the London School of Economics where he later obtained a doctorate in 1916. It is during these years that Malinowski is introduced to the people of Mailu and the Trobriand Islands with whom he would later spend a great deal of time researching (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:272 and Voget 1975:513-514). Malinowski was in the field when World War I broke out, and being an Austro-Hungarian national, technically was considered to be an enemy-alien. With common sense and cool heads prevailing, Malinowski was permitted to remain in the field instead of being detained. It is during these years that he gathered the majority of his information on the Trobriand Islanders from which his many classics were based (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:273). Upon his return to Australia in 1918, Malinowski married Elsie Masson, the daughter of a University of Melbourne professor.

One can see the effects of his separation from his now published private diary that he was depressed a great majority of the time and suffered both psychologically and physically, patterns that would trouble him for the remainder of his life (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:273). In 1921, he began teaching at the London School of Economics, where he later became the school's first professor of anthropology. Malinowski's teaching abilities were exceptional, and like Boas, he too trained an entire generation including E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Raymond Firth (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:273). Firth says that "almost more than anything else, Malinowski was a great teacher." He says that Malinowski was a gifted, inspiring, and perceptive man in addition to his complex and highly intelligent personality (1957:7-8). He was in the United States when World War II broke out and stayed there until his death in 1942. While in the U.S., he did work with the Zapotec Indians in Oaxaca, Mexico during summer vacations and was appointed as a professor at Yale shortly before his death (Firth 1957 2-9).

Schools of Thought & Methodologies

Having a basic understanding of the backgrounds of these two individuals, one can now move forward and with more confidence begin in the process of understanding their schools of thought and approaches to fieldwork. Both Boas and Malinowski started out within the field of the physical sciences and were educated in Germany and Poland respectively, but the majority of their influences within the anthropological field were made in the United States and England (Barnouw 1971:38). With these similarities one can see how and why their ethnographic research was performed with such detail and complexity. Even though there were some similarities between these two prominent anthropological figures, the differences in their processes and methodologies were at times notable.

Franz Boas – The Historical Method and Natural History Approach

Boas' early experiences on Baffin Island led him to the conclusion that would stick with him and dominate his anthropological career. According to Barnouw, this conclusion showed Boas that:

Geography plays a mainly limiting rather than creative role. The Eskimos did things in spite of their environment, not just because of it; they had a particular history and set of traditions behind them which were different from those of other northerly peoples, such as the Siberian Chukchee, who lived in a similar environment. A culture is shaped by many historical forces, including contacts with other societies (1971:39).

Boas felt that the 19th century cultural evolutionists made premature generalizations based on poor and inadequate information. This information was obtained, not from a qualified researcher, but rather from individuals “who often had only a biased, superficial understanding of the people they were observing” and provided more conjecture than fact (Barnouw 1971:39). Boas (and later, his students) made it a point to criticize these views and methods and said that we must first get the facts in order to build a reliable body of ethnographic data from which better generalizations then can be made. Boas used all fields of anthropology to ascertain proper information in the proper context. This full-bodied approach allowed Boas to reconstruct “the history of the growth of ideas with much greater accuracy than the generalizations of a comparative method” (Hyatt 1990:43).

Cultures to Boas were unique and entirely separate entities, and therefore could in no way, shape, or form be compared to another even if under similar social, economic, and environmental conditions. Boas wanted to study each culture in its entirety rather than in bits and pieces. By studying a unique culture in its entirety; by investigating customs, language, social systems, and by even collecting physical measurements, one can understand a cultures’ psychology. Hyatt goes on to say that ,”merging these together, the anthropologist could then penetrate the ‘psychological factors’ that shaped a culture and ascertain the extent to which ‘historical connections’ contributed to the lifestyle of a given society” (1990:43).

Boas’ early viewpoints on culture showed he thought very little of the individual on the whole. This is in direct opposition to Malinowski’s views, but over time Boas changed his views somewhat, though not to the extent of Malinowski’s. This created a rift between his followers on the importance of the individual within a society (McGee and Warms 2000:137). This view changed in part due to his realization that whether or not the person was “typical” to his/her society, the society or culture therein has boundaries set up to keep individuals within the norms of what is and what is not acceptable to them. Boas used this also as a crutch supporting his view on the collection of data from informants. He felt that he could obtain all the knowledge needed to understand a culture from a few key people. This is in part also to the fact that one can only obtain knowledge from persons willing to or having the time to dispense it (Goldschmidt 1959:58-59).

Bronislaw Malinowski – Functionalism, Participant Observation and the Individual

“The archfunctionalist of anthropology, Malinowski is regarded as a founder of modern functionalism in anthropology” (Bohannon and Glazer 1973:274). His ideas of functionalism point to the needs of the individual in turn become the needs of the society. Bohannon and Glazer comment that,

Malinowski’s functionalism is founded on what he regards as the seven basic needs of man: nutrition, reproduction, bodily comforts, safety, relaxation, movement, and growth. The individual needs are satisfied by derived cultural and social institutions, whose functions are to satisfy those needs. In other words, every social institution has a need to satisfy, and so does every cultural item. Malinowski’s view of culture is also based on human biosocial needs - he regards culture as a tool that responds to the needs of human beings in a way that is above any adaptation (1973:274).

This particular view of functionalism, unique to Malinowski, shows that “various cultural beliefs and practices contributed to the smooth functioning of the society while providing individual biological or psychological benefits” (McGee & Warms 2000:158). The individual was imperative because it is the individuals who make up the group. These individuals therefore are good representations of the group because it is they who perform the daily activities, rituals, and so on. This is the key to understanding a culture according to Malinowski. Malinowski, like Boas, believed that only through comprehensive and detailed fieldwork could a proper ethnography be done. He actively hunted for information using a variety of techniques and was renowned for his detail in data collection, but did not feel that such data was sufficient, no matter how detailed. To him, only by working side by side, doing the things the natives do could an ethnographer understand the subtleties of a culture that would otherwise remain unseen (Firth 1957:78-79). Sir James Frazer further points out in the preface of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* the thoroughness of Malinowski’s fieldwork and his ability to see within a culture:

It is characteristic of Dr. Malinowski’s method that he takes full account of the complexity of human nature. He sees the man, so to say, in the round and not in the flat. He remembers that a man is a creature of emotion at least as much as of reason, and he is constantly at pains to discover the emotional as well as the rational basis of human action (1922:ix).

Critics and Contributions

No matter what influence Franz Boas had on the field of anthropology, he still had his critics. Boas refused to theorize about developing anthropological laws and was seen by some as a hindrance and a detriment to the field. He was focused on precise methodology and a strict scientific method. He was concerned about the reconstruction of history, not with the formation of laws derived from it (Hyatt 1990:44). Boas did not technically leave behind a "school of thought", but rather a handful of individuals trained by him and left to develop and make their own decisions for better or for worse (Voget: 1975:337). Not only did Boas use the four-field approach in his fieldwork (cultural, archaeology, physical/biological, and linguistics), but also in his everyday life. Boas combated racism the majority of his life, and I feel that this was a compelling factor in his becoming an anthropologist. He used his position and expertise on more than one occasion to fight racism on all fronts and this agenda continued on until his death. Having been born into a Jewish family in Germany and seeing the rise of Hitler's Nazi party in the 30s and 40s further provoked his feelings on this matter.

Malinowski's field research was thought by many to be a wonderful example of completely unbiased work by an extraordinary anthropologist. While it very well may be a wonderful collection of detailed data, it was hardly unbiased. While he was doing fieldwork in the South Pacific, he battled periods of depression and anger pointed towards the indigenous peoples. His diary (1967) repeatedly shows slanderous and racial remarks towards informants and his constant reliance upon the needle to battle his depression and loneliness. These discoveries came as a great shock to many within the anthropological community upon the release of his diaries. The amazing thing about Malinowski's biases is that he was completely aware of them and took the appropriate measures to ensure they did not interfere with his fieldwork. Not only did he do this, but he was also his own hardest critic.

Raymond Firth said that:

Malinowski considered it the duty of the anthropologist to render a careful and sincere account of his credentials and his mistakes in the field; and in Appendix II to *Coral Gardens*, he recorded his 'Confessions of Ignorance and Failure'. He admitted that a general source of inadequacies in all his material, whether photographic or linguistic or descriptive, consisted in the fact that, like every ethnographer, he was lured by the dramatic, exceptional, and sensational; and he castigated himself for not treating the 'drab, everyday, minor

events with the same love and interest as sensational, large-scale happenings' (1957:79).

Biased or not, Malinowski's works remain classics within the field.

Conclusion

Nearly sixty years after their deaths, which coincidentally both happened in 1942, Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski still continue to be central to the discipline of anthropology. The approaches, schools of thought, and methodologies introduced by Boas and Malinowski are still paramount to the field. This was seen at an early time when A.R. Radcliffe-Brown described the emergences of these trends in 1929. He said there were two different and opposing tendencies in the study of culture. One being the American based view of Franz Boas, which he called the most popular. This regards culture purely from the historical standpoint, and "attempts, in the absence of any historical records, to multiply and elaborate hypothetical reconstructions of an unknown past." The second view, associated with the British and Malinowski, had to do with treating each culture as a "functionally interrelated system and to endeavor to discover the general laws of function for human society as a whole." He goes on to say, "It does not neglect the historical point of view, but regards the processes of social change as something to be studied by actual observation over a period, or by the use of authentic and detailed records." This process accepts history but rejects hypothetical history (Naroll & Naroll 1973:187).

Whether or not Boas or even Malinowski would have accepted this point of view is inconsequential. The fact of the matter is that the point was made about the differences in method. To say one is better than the other is not only impractical, but also irrelevant. No one way of doing something can be entirely right or entirely wrong. So is the case with this. People use things to their liking, or as the use suits them, and ethnography is not (at least shouldn't be) any different.

It is unfortunate in my eyes that there is no adequate way in comparing these two men other than the format given; that is the broken manner in which material is presented. There is no format that allows such detail to be commingled with other information without confusion or repetition setting in, hence the reason I have chosen to separate these two men and their methodologies into different sections and allow the reader to compare, contrast, or ignore the information presented in the manner they see fit. By no means is this an adequate representation of the importance of such anthropological greats as

Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. It is however an attempt at shedding some light on their roles and contributions within the field of anthropology to not only the layperson, but also the professional.

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