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The Growth of Economic, Subsistence, and Ecological Studies in American Anthropology[1]

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It is paradoxical that economic, subsistence and ecological factors are a major center of interest within American anthropology today, since at one time the anthropologists of this country tended to ignore material aspects and to minimize their importance for research. This paper attempts to resolve the paradox by tracing the growth of interest in material factors to certain intellectual and dynamic elements within the Boasian tradition. Whereas such writers as Harris (1968) have represented the materialist approach as the nemesis of Boasian thought, the position of this paper is that a form of materialism is the natural offspring of that system of thought.

THE CHIEF GOAL of this paper is to resolve a striking paradox of American anthropology: the upsurge of interest in economic, subsistence, and ecological factors beginning about the late 1930's.

On one hand, the Boasian wing of the discipline tended both to ignore economics, subsistence patterns, and ecology, and to minimize their importance in the study of cultures. Harris (1968:344) writes of an "anti-materialist current" that once prevailed in American anthropology. He remarks that Lowie, for one, "willingly permitted himself to be guided by a pack of veritable old wives' tales whenever he was obliged to consider the claims of cultural materialism."

On the other hand, however, the study of economic, subsistence, and ecological features—which I shall refer to collectively as the material component of culture—has become one of the major research themes in American anthropology today, as even a cursory glance at the titles of recent journal articles or Ph.D. theses will testify. At the present time,

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virtually every major department in North America includes at least one specialist in either economic anthropology or cultural ecology. The shift entails more than a change in research emphasis, for it has been accompanied by a significant theoretical development. One of the most visible and vigorous schools of thought in American anthropology today is that of cultural materialism, which rests on the thesis that the cultural features most directly involved in promoting the material welfare of the members of society constitute the foundation of the larger cultural system (Harris 1968:4, 230-232, 240-241, 658).

In *The Rise of Anthropological Theory,* Harris (1968:271-273) offers an explanation for the paradoxical growth of interest in the material component of culture among American anthropologists, with which I take issue. According to Harris, the Boasian rejection of materialism was linked to the "subversive" connotations that had become attached to the materialist thesis by about the end of the 19th century. Because of its political and ideological associations, the "cultural-materialist strategy" was alternately rebuked and ignored in anthropology, and it was not seriously applied until almost 1940 (Harris 1968:249). Harris (1968:344) implies that the Boasian position with regard to cultural materialism was based on "hearsay" and not on a dispassionate consideration of empirical evidence. He suggests that when the attention of American anthropology eventually did turn toward the study of the "techno-environmental and techno-economic relationships" it was due to a growing desire to establish the scientific status of the discipline. Harris (1968:655) writes

> cultural ecology, precisely because it links emic phenomena with the etic conditions of "nature," strengthens the association between social science and the "harder" disciplines . . . The contemporary premium upon scientism thus makes the expansion of cultural ecological research almost inevitable.

Harris' account of the growth of cultural materialism attempts to supply intellectual support for his own position. According to him, the reason the Boasians could reject materialism was because they had not tried it; by implication, the reason for its substantial following today is that the strategy is now being put to the test and is being found successful.

With Harris, I suggest that one element in the paradoxical growth of interest in the material component of culture among American anthropologists was a desire to emulate the sciences and to locate theoretical principles of general significance in the cultural data. But this was only one element within a larger complex of factors.

The growth of interest in material phenomena is to be seen in the context of a growing uneasiness that had been welling up in American

anthropology since about the early 1920's. The uneasiness was based on the feeling that the discipline simply was not living up to its aspirations, for it seemed to be mired in the investigation of comparatively trivial issues. American anthropologists wanted to see principles of deeper and broader significance in their work than the Boasians had been able to achieve. Two outgrowths of the discontent were acculturation and culture and personality studies, and a third was the emerging focus on the material component of culture.

The growing uneasiness within the discipline explains much of the *motivation* behind the developments taking place in American anthropology since the 1920's; it does not explain the different *forms* which the reaction took, in that it does not elucidate why the American anthropologists responded by turning toward acculturation studies and culture and personality research and not toward Malinowskian functionalism or the Durkheimian analysis of symbols. In view of the strong "anti-materialist current" that prevailed, the growth of interest in the material component of culture is especially perplexing.

To understand why the growing dissatisfaction prompted movements in some directions but not others, one approach is to inquire into the structure of Boasian thought and to locate predispositions that would favor developments along particular lines. Such a study reveals a nascent form of materialism within the Boasian tradition, for it was held that, although institutions vary almost randomly according to the vicissitudes of history, ultimately they are rooted in the physical world through the material needs of the members of society. In this nascent materialism, the material component of culture was a potential focus of interest for both theory and research.

When interest did become focused on the material component, it was triggered by the particular way in which the theoretical malaise of American anthropology was conceived at about the end of the 1930's. The principal stumbling block preventing the development or discovery of principles of general significance, it was thought, was the Boasian notion of the historical diversity of institutions. How could the researcher ever achieve generalizations in view of the Boasian insistence on the capriciousness of cultural forms? The solution was to penetrate behind custom and locate a substratum which is immune to the vicissitudes of history and which could be conceived as the foundation of the more superficial and variable features of the cultural whole. Given the nascent materialism of Boasian thought, the material component of culture was a logical place to look. The result was a growing interest in material factors and eventually the emergence of a full-blown cultural materialism.

In the next section, I give an account of the growing uneasiness that

motivated the budding interest in the material component of culture among American anthropologists during the late 1930's and early 1940's. In the third section, I show that Boasian thought contained a nascent form of materialism, making a focus on economic, subsistence and ecological factors a potential avenue of development; I then show that the desire to root institutions in a substratum of forces or processes that are immune to the vicissitudes of history made the growing interest in the material component of culture a particularly appropriate response to the uneasiness that many anthropologists felt.

THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE GROWING INTEREST IN MATERIAL FACTORS

The Boasian self-image gave explicit recognition to the meagerness of the theoretical conclusions that had been achieved. During the first two decades of the century Boas and his followers viewed this theoretical austerity in a positive light, as a sign of scholarly restraint and self-discipline, a product of the highest standards of empirical evidence (e.g., Goldenweiser 1921, 1925a, 1925b). But by the 1920's the evaluation began to slip somewhat toward the negative pole, and a trace of defensiveness crept into the writings of American anthropologists. For example, in the mid-twenties Goldenweiser (1925b:247) noted that the rigor and restraint of the American School had resulted in "a certain timidity in the face of broader and more speculative problems and in a reluctance to indulge in spontaneous creativeness and synthesis."

There is abundant evidence of a growing reaction within Boasian anthropology to its own theoretical and methodological austerity—evidence of a feeling that the discipline was simply not living up to its professional aspirations. At the very beginning of the 1920's, Kroeber (1920:380) lamented the "comparative sterility" of Lowie's *Primitive Society,* for in the latter there is "little . . . that can be applied in other sciences." Kroeber suggested

> As long as we continue offering the world only reconstructions of specific detail, and consistently show a negativistic attitude toward broader conclusions, the world will find very little of profit in ethnology (Kroeber 1920:380).
>
> . . . if we cannot present anything that the world can use, it is at least incumbent on us to let this failure burn into our consciousness (Kroeber 1920:381).

Near the middle of the decade Willey and Herskovits (1927:275) noted that the work of American anthropology "has been so detailed as to lead to some criticism that more ultimate generalizations were being lost sight of." They cited an earlier article by Boas, in which he had written

It may seem to the distant observer that American students are engaged in a mass of detailed investigations without much bearing upon the solution of the ultimate problems of a philosophic history of human civilization.

Boas (1920, in 1940:283-284) protested that the interpretation was unjust; the American anthropologist was indeed concerned about "the ultimate questions," but he did "not hope . . . to solve an intricate historical problem by a formula." In an article published in 1932, Murdock (1932:200) wrote that "the anthropologists in many cases have failed to see the forest for the trees." He then set out to delineate a few essential theoretical principles which he believed both sociologists and anthropologists would agree to, such as the principle that cultural behavior is socially and not biologically determined.

Uneasiness and defensiveness over the discipline's shortcomings appear to have been on the increase during the latter half of the 1930's. Kluckhohn (1936:196; see also 1939) wrote that "In this country we have, it seems to me, often been content to collect and to cull, to remain on the purely descriptive level." Wissler (1936:490) noted that at that time some people regarded ethnology to be "bankrupt." Linton (1938:246) remarked that ethnology "is weak in its conceptual framework and vague as to its ultimate aims." He commented, "If ethnology is to be rated as a descriptive science, it can show a good record of accomplishment. If it wishes to be rated as a dynamic science, its work has barely begun." Cooper (1939:132), in a review of Lowie's *History of Ethnological Theory,* remarked upon "the note of pessimism—'What are we accomplishing?'—which runs through so much of our professional chatter in the lobbies and around the luncheon table;" Cooper suggested that Lowie's book was a partial antidote for this feeling, since it revealed the progress that anthropology had achieved. In the same year, White (1939:573) suggested that "What we need in American ethnology today is not additional facts, but interpretations of the facts we already possess in abundance."

It is not at all certain what triggered this reaction against Boasian austerity or why it got underway during the twenties (see Bunzel 1960:574-575). What is important is that it spawned a series of theoretical and methodological innovations, shifts in research emphasis, and the like. These developments were originally rather heterogeneous, but most of them reflected a feeling of the inadequacy of past methods, especially a disenchantment with the method of diffusion, and a desire to locate some new approach that would break the theoretical deadlock in which the discipline found itself.

It was not until the 1930's that the developments came to fruition. Using the articles published in the *American Anthropologist* as a guide, the majority of the research that appeared during the 1920's was not

significantly different from what had been done in the past, whereas by about 1934 the writings tend to have more in common with modern interests—diffusion research is supplanted by holistic studies, for example. The early 1930's, then, were a watershed in the history of American anthropology and mark the beginning of a distinct period in its development, a period that in certain respects came to an end with the American involvement in World War II.[2] I refer to it as the pre-war era in American anthropology.

Running through most of the research of the pre-war era was a set of themes or trends which not only define what it was that set this period apart from the past, but which also suggest the major forces that were at work within the discipline at the time. The first theme was that of holism or integrationalism; this was apparent even in the purely descriptive, non-explanatory studies of the pre-war period (e.g., Haas 1940). The trend toward integrationalism was largely a reaction against what was regarded as a chief source of the failure of American anthropology—the historical diffusionist studies of the past—and the primary context in which the reaction appeared was in the arguments over historical vs. functional explanations (see Gillin 1936; Lesser 1935). In brief, the rise of integrationalism was linked directly to what Linton (1938:246) described in 1938 as the "current fashion to underrate the importance of the discovery of diffusion and to deprecate the work of those who have investigated it intensively."

A second theme was the search for general principles behind cultural phenomena. Bennett (1944a:171) noted that prior to 1932 the published accounts of the Sun Dance were descriptive and historical, but that from that year there was "a consistent tendency to emphasize the functional nature and theoretical aspects of the dance rather than its history." For example, in Hoebel's account of the Comanche Sun Dance, published in 1941, "the dance is used as a *point of departure* for developing special problems of cultural dynamics; not as a subject in itself" (Bennett 1944a:172; emphasis in the original). Judging by the articles in the *American Anthropologist,* the tendency for empirical studies to elucidate general principles was evident in the early 1920's and the first half of the 1930's, but it was not very pronounced at that time. It was not until 1936 that it became prominent, and by the end of the decade a more or less explicit interest in establishing general principles appears in nearly a majority of the articles published in the journal.

2 After the United States declared war late in 1941, a substantial number of anthropologists either joined the Armed Forces or otherwise became actively engaged in the war effort. Normal research was severely disrupted, and much that was published during the war years reflected as much a preoccupation with the world crisis as a desire to contribute to the progress of anthropological thought.

Just as the movement toward integrationalism reflected in part the sense of failure that had become attached to the diffusionist approach, the growing interest in the establishment of generalizations was in part a dialectical response to the theoretical limitations of historical particularism (see Kluckhohn 1953:511-512). The reaction against Boasian historicism was evident in the work of a number of writers of the pre-war period, including Redfield (1934) and Lesser (1939a, 1939b); but it was most unequivocally expressed by Murdock (1937a:xiv), who wrote that the Boasians

> have forgotten that scientific research must be relevant as well as technically sound, and have lost themselves in a maze of inconsequential details. By engrossing themselves in their data they have converted a means into an end and have lost sight of the primary function of a science, the formulation and testing of generalizations.

Murdock's comparative studies were explicitly directed toward rising above the historical particularism of the Boasians (e.g., Murdock 1937b).

The third trend which emerged during the pre-war period was a direct response to events that were taking place completely outside of anthropology—the political, economic and social problems that were so prominent during the 1930's and 1940's. Whereas the first two themes of the pre-war period fell within the category of pure research, the third was the movement toward applied research.

The tendency toward applied work was soon felt in most sub-fields within the discipline. For example, national character studies emerged as an important facet of culture and personality research during the war and in response to wartime needs (see Singer 1961:43-44). Acculturation studies were decisively influenced by practical considerations, such as the problems confronting the American Indian and others during the Depression (Beals 1953:622; Kroeber 1948:426). The sub-field of applied anthropology itself got underway in 1934 (Foster 1969:200), and the first issue of the journal *Applied Anthropology* appeared in 1941.

In summary, a sense of concern over the achievements of the discipline was evident by the 1920's, and it seems to have increased with the worsening of the economic and political climate during the 1930's and early 1940's. It was in the context of this growing uncertainty and defensiveness within American anthropology that the major developments of the pre-war period are to be understood. The rise of integrationalism was in part a response to the failures of diffusionism as perceived within the discipline; the growing interest in broad generalizations was largely a product of the feelings of futility over the historical particularism of the past; and applied research constituted an effort to

use anthropological methods to attack problems of immediate significance.

It was during the late 1930's and the 1940's that a growing interest in the material features of culture began to emerge in American anthropology. For example, during this period there appeared a variety of monographs—by Steward (1938), Wagley (1941), Foster (1942), Gillin (1945), and Beals (1946)—in which economic or material phenomena occupied a prominent position. Theoretical developments were moving apace. Herskovits published several theoretical articles on economic anthropology during the 1930's (Herskovits 1934, 1936, 1939), and his *Economic Life of Primitive Peoples* appeared in 1940. Steward was developing his cultural ecological approach during the latter half of the 1930's, and White's evolutionary theory—a theory built around his notion of technological determinism—began appearing in print in the late 1930's.

The growing interest in the material features of culture was directly linked to the professional and social crises outlined above, and it is to be viewed in the context of the three major trends of the pre-war period.

The trend toward holism, of course, was enormously significant, for when studies of the material component of culture began to bud during the late 1930's and the 1940's, emphasis was placed on the interrelatedness of the constituent elements. But as crucial as the theme of holism may have been, the trends toward applied work and toward establishing generalizations were even more significant. These two movements not only influenced the form which studies of material phenomena took, but they supplied the impetus behind them as well.

The trend toward applied research contributed to the growing interest in economic phenomena in that the study of practical problems led directly to matters pertaining to the subject population's material welfare, such as subsistence patterns and health standards. The Smithsonian's Institute of Social Anthropology, begun in 1943 under the directorship of Julian Steward, is illustrative (see Foster 1967). The majority of the publications of the Institute focused on or emphasized ecological and economic phenomena. This may have been due in part to Steward's guidance, but the fact that the research was oriented toward practical ends was also important, as suggested by the Institute's first publication, which was devoted to a study of housing among the Sierra Tarascans (Beals, Carrasco, and McCorkle 1944). The association between an interest in practical problems on one hand and in economic and subsistence factors on the other is also evident in a number of field studies that were unconnected with the Institute (e.g., Bennett 1944b, 1946; Mekeel 1936; Thompson 1949a, 1949b; Wagley 1941).

The growing interest in applied problems does not entirely account

for the attention that was now given to economic factors, subsistence patterns, and cultural ecology, however, for much of the newborn interest in material features was stimulated by and reflected the growing desire to go beyond historical particularism and to arrive at general principles behind culture (for example, Bennett 1944b; Goldfrank 1945; Hallowell 1949; Herskovits 1934, 1936, 1939). The most telling illustrations are found in the works of Steward and White.

Steward (1940:11-12) noted the growing dissatisfaction that many anthropologists felt over the accumulation of detailed historical studies —which were lacking in "impressive and broad generalization"—and he explicitly conceived his cultural ecological approach to surmount the impasse of historical particularism. For example, at the end of "Economic and Social Basis of Primitive Bands," Steward (1936:344-345) wrote

> Underlying this paper is the assumption that every cultural phenomenon is the product of some definite cause or causes. This is a necessary presupposition if anthropology is considered a science. The method of this paper has been first to ascertain the causes of primitive bands through analysis of the inner functional or organic connection of the components of a culture and their environmental basis. Next, through comparisons, it endeavored to discover what degree of generalization is possible . . . The extent . . . to which generalizations can be made may be ascertained by further application of the methods followed here.
>
> This paper, therefore, is but the first of a series which I shall devote to this general objective.

Steward's cultural ecological framework was conceived in the context of and was stimulated by the growing desire among American anthropologists to achieve generalizations of broad significance.

Similarly, White explicitly and consistently presented his evolutionary theory as an alternative to the historical particularism of the Boasians (see White 1943:355, 1945, 1946, 1947:182-185, 1949:368-372). In a paper published in 1943 he (White 1943:355) wrote that the Boasian anti-evolutionists "have given us instead [of evolutionism] a philosophy of 'planless hodge-podge-ism.' " And three years later he (White 1946:78) said

> Instead of going from the particular to the universal, which is the course followed everywhere in science, Boas went from the particular to further particulars . . . Not only did he fail to see the forest for the trees, he could scarcely see the tree for the branches, or the branches for the twigs. And no two twigs were alike . . .
>
> The picture of culture that Boas produced working from this point of view, was precisely what might have been expected. There was no order, no rhyme or reason, to the great mass of cultural phenomena that make up the history and

life of mankind. As R. H. Lowie has so neatly expressed it, civilization appeared to be a "planless hodge-podge, a chaotic jumble."

White (1947:184) suggested that what was behind the Boasian " 'chaotic jumble' conception of culture" was "the rejection of evolutionism." By rejecting evolutionary theory, in White's view, writers like Boas and Lowie had cut culture loose to drift pointlessly in a sea of random historical currents and eddies.

The materialist approach to culture enjoyed a steady growth of acceptance and influence in American anthropology. The 1940's saw the appearance of a number of empirical studies that attempted to root institutions in the environment and in the material needs of the members of society (e.g., Bennett 1944b; Gayton 1946; Goldfrank 1945; Hallowell 1949; Steward 1936, 1937, 1938), and these were regarded at the time as a distinct and innovative movement. Thompson (1949a:253) wrote, "The problem of the ecological base of cultural phenomena is undergoing reconsideration by anthropologists from various points of view," and she described this as a "trend" within the discipline.

The work of both Steward and White assumed increasing prominence within the discipline largely because they gave theoretical definition to the materialist movement that was underway. The movement gained both momentum and focus immediately after World War II when Steward left the Smithsonian and joined the faculty at Columbia University, where a group of students with an interest in the materialist approach had just begun graduate work. Among them were Morton Fried, Robert Manners, Sidney Mintz, Elman Service, and Eric Wolf, each of whom contributed to the further development and acceptance of cultural ecology, cultural evolutionism, and the materialist interpretation of institutions.

THE INTELLECTUAL BASIS OF THE GROWING INTEREST IN MATERIAL FEATURES

What is remarkable about the materialist point of view in American anthropology today is not only that it could have developed out of such a seemingly hostile, "antimaterialist" environment, but also that it could come to enjoy such widespread support, for it is currently one of the dominant schools of thought within the discipline. It is also the leading approach within the positivist wing of American anthropology —that wing of the discipline to which the goal of research is the establishment of scientific generalizations—in that there is a marked tendency for the positivist point of view to be dominated by the materialists and for the materialists to be among the most vocal proponents of positivism within the field. The relationship is not

surprising since materialism lends itself to a scientific procedure and to scientific forms of explanation, and yet cultural materialism is not the only form of positivism available to the anthropologist. In Britain, for example, the leading positivist social anthropologists, such as Max Gluckman and Meyer Fortes, belong to the structural-functional school of thought.

The question to which this paper must now address itself is this: given the growing uneasiness and dissatisfaction over the austerity of Boasian research and given the growing desire for theoretical and methodological innovations that would restore the anthropologist's confidence in his own work, why was it that a focus on the material features of culture was such an attractive and successful avenue of development? Why did it become one of the leading forms of response to the desire to establish generalizations? The answer to the question comes in two parts, the first of which is that Boasian thought contained a nascent form of materialism, and hence it included a predisposition to develop in precisely that direction.

The "antimaterialistic current" of Boasian anthropology was very real and very powerful, but it did not rest upon a failure to give serious consideration to the materialist approach or to test it against empirical data, as Harris suggests (e.g., see Anonymous 1913; Boas 1928:239-245; 1930:98-102; 1930, in 1940:265-267; 1932, in 1940:255-256; 1938b:173-177; Bunzel 1938; Dixon 1928; Goldenweiser 1916, 1922:292-301; Kroeber 1939; Lowie 1917:47-65, 1919, 1920:356-357, 1938, 1960; Mead 1937; Sapir 1912; Wissler 1912, 1913). Rather, its "antimaterialism" was firmly grounded in a set of seemingly indisputable facts. In particular, diffusion research appeared to refute "geographical determinism" in unequivocal fashion, for distributional analyses revealed that cultural and environmental phenomena did not co-vary the way they should if cultural traits were truly a response to geographical conditions and material factors.

Nevertheless, a nascent materialism was manifest in Boasian thought in two ways. First, according to the Boasians, the vicissitudes of culture history are not entirely boundless, nor is geography completely without influence on culture. Rather, the conditions of the natural environment are comparatively broad limiting factors which restrict the historical development of cultures and therefore the range of institutional variations; they set limits upon the scope of historical accident (see Hatch 1973:63-75). For example, Boas (1930, in 1940:265-266) wrote that

> The lack of vegetable products in the Arctic, the absence of stone in extended parts of South America, the dearth of water in the desert, to mention only a few outstanding facts, limit the activities of man in definite ways.

In rejecting environmentalism, the Boasians did not assume an entirely negative stance, for their position was that of possibilism.

The second and more important aspect of the nascent materialism of the Boasians was the way in which they conceived these limiting factors. In a few isolated cases it was suggested that the environment sometimes acts upon culture directly, as when such local phenomena as "the activity of volcanoes or the presence of curious land forms" become the subject of folktales (Boas 1938b:174). In other cases it was suggested that the development of certain traits may be limited by the absence of raw materials, an example being the restrictions on architecture arising from a lack of stone (Boas 1930, in 1940:265).

However, implicit in most of the instances cited by the Boasians as legitimate cases of the limitations of the environment was the notion that geography impinges upon culture primarily by acting on man's physical nature. What was limiting was not the environment, but the relationship between the environment and the material needs of the members of society—the needs for food, water, shelter, defense, and the like. Of particular importance was the implicit assumption that when environmental factors pass beyond the thresholds established by man's material needs—when the climate is too cold for human survival, or when the local flora and fauna do not provide adequate sustenance for a given population density—cultural adjustments must take place. The overwhelming majority of instances cited by the Boasians as legitimate cases of environmental limitations concern such material factors as soil fertility, the presence and absence of fish and other wild animals, the effect of seasonal changes on the food supply and on the migration of game, the need for protection against climatic extremes, and the local availability of natural resources such as iron ore (see Boas 1930:98-99; 1930, in 1940:265-266; 1938b:174-175; Dixon 1928:6-18; Lowie 1917:63-64, 1937:260-261; Wissler 1922:370-374).

The singularity of the Boasian view that the environment influences culture primarily by means of its effects on man's material needs is emphasized when seen in contrast to a viewpoint that was explicitly rejected. This was the idea that geography affects culture by acting upon the sentiments or emotions—that climate has a "stimulating or enervating effect . . . upon the individual" (Boas 1930:99). For example, the Boasians gave no credence to the thesis that a tropical climate limits architectural or political achievements by fostering indolence among the inhabitants.

It is possible to argue that, according to the Boasian views about cultural limitations, man's material needs play a more fundamental role than the environment. According to Boasian thought, the primary reason the environment is a limiting factor at all is because it both

serves and threatens man's material welfare. The role of the environment is contingent on and reducible to the nature of man's physical requirements. In short, within the Boasian framework, it was not so much the environment which acts as a limiting factor, but the material nature of the members of society.

If the environmental factors that the Boasians singled out as limiting agents were truly secondary to the material needs of the members of society, then why did this go unnoticed in their writings? The factors of the environment impinge on man's material needs in different ways in different parts of the world. For example, the implications of rainfall for human survival are quite different in a desert region than in a tropical rain forest. As a result, the Boasians were led to concentrate on the variable features of the environment, while the other part of the equation, the universal needs of mankind, remained implicit.

The nascent materialism of Boasian thought is manifest in the distinctive way in which they viewed the subject of economics, for the latter was tacitly defined on materialist grounds.

In the writings of the American anthropologists, economics and environment were closely related. For example, Boas (1930:100) wrote that "in most cases the environment acts [on culture] through the intermediary of economic conditions," and he typically discussed "economic determinism" and "geographical determinism" together. What is more, the examples which Boas cited as legitimate cases of the influence of economics on the rest of culture were typically interchangeable with those illustrating the limitations of the environment (Boas 1930, in 1940:267; 1930:100; 1938a:678-679).

The reason for the association between the two sets of factors is clear. The environment was conceived as influencing culture primarily by acting on man's physical nature, as I have suggested. Similarly, implicit in the work of the Boasians was the assumption that economics consists in those cultural items that directly serve man's material needs, and in this sense theirs was a materialist conception of economics. For example, the materialist viewpoint underlies Boas' statement that economics is the intermediary between the environment and culture: economics is the point of articulation between the two precisely because the economic features of culture are the means by which the members of society protect themselves from the elements and by which they utilize its resources for their own physical benefit. An article written by Boas and published in 1930 included a brief survey of the anthropologist's findings concerning the economic life of primitive peoples around the world (Boas 1930:82-84). His discussion centered almost exclusively on such matters as the procurement of food, the division of labor, property rights, and the exchange of economic necessities: in short, the implicit

focus of the entire account was the problem of man's material welfare. A similar orientation pervaded the discussion of economics written by other Boasians as well (see Bunzel 1938; Goldenweiser 1922:132 ff.; Lowie 1919).

This is a very distinctive conception of economics. It is a conception which contrasts markedly with that of the modern economist, who operates with the rather flexible idea of wants in place of the notion of biologically fixed needs. According to the modern economist, such nonessentials as jewelry, toys and art objects, may all be part of the economic system. The Boasians implicitly conceived the economic sector of culture in terms of man's *material* needs and then tacitly restricted economic phenomena to practical or useful items—such as hunting implements, cooking vessels, fur garments, canoes, fire-making techniques, and tanning processes.

An important consequence follows from this view of economics. A frequent criticism of the Boasians is that they tended to concentrate on technology rather than economics in their monographs. Herskovits (1936:353) accuses the American anthropologists of retreating into studies of technology due to their bewilderment in the face of economic theory. In the Boasian view, however, economics *was* technology for the most part, in that those features of culture that directly serve man's material welfare consist primarily of such items as housing, hunting devices, clothing, and the like. In turning to technology, the Americans were not retreating from the study of economics at all; it might be said that, in their view, they were meeting the challenge head-on. The Boasians' tendency to focus on technology in their discussions of economics was an expression of the nascent materialism of their thought.

In sum, the first part of the answer to why a focus on material factors became one of the leading responses to the growing desire for generalizations is that Boasian thought contained a nascent form of materialism, and it then constituted a potential avenue of development. I turn now to the second part of the answer by describing the circumstance that *released* this potential. It consists of the fact that the materialist approach was uniquely suited to the theoretical needs of American anthropologists who wanted to rise above historical particularism.

If the American anthropologist were ever to achieve generalizations that reflect something more than the unique historical development of particular cultures, he would have to locate a set of factors or processes which affect all cultures equally and which are at least partially immune to the vicissitudes of history. He would have to conceive

institutions not as the residue of historical accidents, but as a reflection of conditions or exigencies the force of which is felt in the present.

Several possible alternatives were available to the Boasians in their attempt to root institutions in the conditions of the present. One of them was the functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown, according to which institutions are grounded in the universal problem of social stability and cohesion. In Radcliffe-Brown's scheme, the similarities between the institutions of different peoples, and the generalizations that are to emerge from anthropological research, manifest the fact that all societies must come to terms with the same functional needs. Within the context of Boasian thought, however, Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist thesis was decidedly unconvincing. To Boas, the problem of stability and cohesion in society was a cultural variable. Such peoples as the Pueblo Indians emphasized social cooperation and stability, whereas others, including the Kwakiutl, tolerated considerable conflict and factiousness. The problem of stability and cohesion could not provide a set of fixed points in the flux of history precisely because the desire for a stable and cohesive society is a cultural value that is elaborated here and de-emphasized there according to historical vicissitudes (Hatch 1973:235-239). Despite the considerable discussion that centered around functionalism during the 1930's and 1940's, few American anthropologists ever pursued the option set out by Radcliffe-Brown, and most of those who did had been students of his at the University of Chicago. Radcliffe-Brown's functionalism was able to excite the imagination of British anthropologists, but not that of the Boasians.

A second possible course to take in the attempt to anchor institutions in the conditions of the present was to move in the direction of Malinowski, according to whom such cultural practices as magic express the inborn needs and drives of the personality. In Malinowski's scheme, institutions are rooted in and reflect the universal properties of the human character.

On the surface, at least, this option had considerable merit. The Boasians employed a subjective approach to culture, in that they interpreted institutions from the perspective of the traditional values, beliefs, and categories of the society being studied (see Aberle 1960). In searching for a basis upon which to establish generalizations, then, it was logical to attempt to penetrate beneath the subjective features of culture and to root institutions in the natural properties of the human personality. The Boasians exhibited a marked tendency to do just that. Even when the principle of historical relativity enjoyed its widest acceptance and esteem within the discipline, the existence of certain universal cultural categories—such as "economic conditions and indus-

try, art, religion and society" (Goldenweiser 1922:131)—was generally accepted, and they were commonly accounted for by *ad hoc* explanations of a psychological order. For example, Lowie (1924) accounted for the universality of religious phenomena by reference to a sentiment of awe that people feel toward the strange and mysterious. He also accepted the theory that the horror of incest is instinctive (Lowie 1920:15). Goldenweiser (1922:165) ascribed the universality of art to an "aesthetic impulse," at least in part, and Boas (1927:9) appears to have done the same. Murdock (1932:203) wrote that the institutions that recur in every society "presumably have their roots in hereditary impulses or drives."

During the late 1930's psychoanalytic influences finally penetrated into the mainstream of American anthropology and provided the basis for a number of studies that attempted to root institutions in psychological factors of a universal order. In particular, beginning in the late 1930's a movement was underway in which institutions were linked to the anxiety feelings of subject populations (see especially Kluckhohn's (1944) study of Navaho witchcraft). Even though the approach made considerable headway during the 1940's, it never enjoyed as widespread an acceptance as that which eventually characterized the materialist movement.

A disadvantage common to all these attempts to root institutions within the inborn nature of the personality is that they ran directly counter not only to a core feature of American anthropological thought, but also to a view that the Boasians had struggled to foster within the social sciences since almost the turn of the century. This was the view that the human personality is largely the product of cultural conditioning and that the subjective component of culture is learned and not inherited biologically (cf. Stocking 1968:195-233, 270-307). Within the Boasian scheme, the human personality is almost infinitely malleable, so it cannot provide the basis for a comparative science. Explanations of cultural universals in terms of inborn psychological principles led almost inevitably to dead ends in American anthropology, the principal exception being the psychoanalytical movement mentioned above.

The fate of the theory behind Herskovits' analysis of primitive economics is illustrative of the difficulties faced by theories that attempted to root institutions in the personality. By the latter half of the 1930's Herskovits was an outspoken advocate of the view that a goal of anthropology should be the search for scientific generalizations (e.g., see Herskovits 1938:119-120), and when he turned to the study of primitive economics his interest in general principles appears to have stimulated his interest in the work of Thorstein Veblen (Herskovits 1934, 1936, 1939, 1940:Part V, 1947:284-288). According to Herskovits, Veblen's

concept of conspicuous consumption has broad cross-cultural applicability, for it elucidates such historically distinct phenomena as ritual offerings among the Dahomey, the potlatch of the Kwakiutl, and the patterns of wealth accumulation among modern Western societies (e.g., see Herskovits 1940:421-425). The dynamic principle behind each of these institutions is the desire of the individual in society to distribute and display economically valuable goods for the purpose of advancing his own prestige. Herskovits (1940:422) remarked that in developing the concept of conspicuous consumption, Veblen may have "hit upon one of those principles which, in generalized form, are applicable to human societies everywhere."

Herskovits' suggestions concerning the principle of conspicuous consumption stimulated comparatively little interest among American anthropologists. Like Malinowski, Herskovits was attempting to ground economic institutions in a universal and inborn trait of the human personality, "the desire for prestige" (Herskovits 1947:284). He was proposing that the similarities between economic institutions across the world derive from the fact that man everywhere is moved by the natural impulse to maximize his own interests by manipulating cultural prestige symbols. Within the Boasian frame of reference, however, human motivations express cultural values which vary from society to society. In some societies an emphasis is placed on the acquisition of prestige, and the individual in those cultures is indeed a self-interested calculator. But in other societies emphasis is placed on social cooperation and harmony, and in these cases the individual is not a cynical manipulator at all (see Hatch 1973:307-308). Herskovits' suggestion did not take root in American anthropology because it ran counter to some fundamental assumptions behind the Boasian intellectual tradition.

A third possibility in the attempt to root institutions in the conditions of the present was to turn toward the material component of culture. This alternative had considerable merit within the Boasian frame of reference, in that it was the natural environment together with the universal material needs of the members of society that served as the connecting link between human institutions and the physical world. It was these material factors which imposed limits on the historical vicissitudes of diffusion and integration and which kept institutions from developing in a wholly fortuitous manner. A pattern of religious ritual or of warfare might be elaborated in almost whimsical fashion according to the vicissitudes of history, for example, but because of the limitations of the environment and of man's material nature developments could only go so far.

The theories of Steward and White were analogous to Herskovits' proposals concerning the principles of conspicuous consumption, for all

three schemes were developed in part in an attempt to rise above historical particularism and to elucidate principles of general significance. The difference, however, is that Steward and White looked toward the material features of the environment and toward man's physical needs in order to root institutions in the conditions of the present, whereas Herskovits looked toward man's inborn nature. When Steward and White first began to elaborate materialistic theories of culture they were ignored in some quarters and chastised in others, but their ideas struck a response in a growing number of American anthropologists to whom the perspective of cultural materialism was a logical step in transcending the theoretical limitations of historical particularism.

SUMMARY

The paradoxical growth of interest in material factors among American anthropologists is typically represented as a development taking place totally outside the Boasian tradition of thought; the cultural materialist approach itself is generally conceived as the nemesis of Boasian anthropology, and its emergence is usually viewed as a dramatic break in historical continuity. Harris, for example, regards the movement toward the materialist viewpoint as a result of the rediscovery of an intellectual current to which the Boasians had originally turned their backs because of its subversive connotations.

In this paper I have looked into the Boasian tradition in order to explain both the growth of interest in material factors and the emergence of cultural materialism among American anthropologists.

A key to many of the developments taking place in American anthropology since the late 1920's was a growing sense of crisis, a feeling of dissatisfaction and defensiveness about the ultimate value or purpose of the discipline. It was a response largely to the theoretical and methodological austerity that had characterized Boasian research for so many years.

The sense of crisis helped stimulate the interest in material factors in two ways. First, the growing desire to attack problems of immediate significance fostered the development of applied research, which in turn stimulated an interest in such material factors as subsistence patterns, housing standards, and health. Second—and far more important—is that much of the growing interest in the material component of culture reflected a desire to establish generalizations of broad significance. The impetus behind the evolutionism of both Steward and White, for example, was largely a desire to rise above the theoretical limitations of historical particularism.

But why should the desire to establish generalizations stimulate the

response it did—a growing interest in material factors? In view of the strong "antimaterialist current" of the Boasian tradition, why was it the materialist viewpoint and not some other that assumed dominance among those within American anthropology who were engaged in the search for scientific regularities?

My answer comes in two parts. First, Boasian thought contained a nascent form of materialism, and consequently it had the potential for developing in precisely that direction. Second, materialism was highly suited to the task of rising above historical particularism. In order to arrive at conclusions of a general nature, what was needed was to root institutions in a substratum of hard, necessary factors—factors which are relatively impervious to historical accident and which can therefore serve as a basis for generalizations. The materialist approach seemed to satisfy these needs, and because of the nascent materialism of Boasian thought it was also more compatible with that intellectual tradition than the other theoretical alternatives that were available.

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