

## **Boasian era quotes**

### **Franz Boas**

"We cannot say that the occurrence of the same phenomena is always due to the same causes, and thus that it is proved that the human mind obeys the same laws everywhere. We must demand that the causes from which it developed be investigated and that comparisons be restricted to those phenomena which have been proved to be the effects of the same causes. We must insist that this investigation be made preliminary to all extended comparative studies."

"...certain laws exist which govern the growth of human culture, and it is our endeavor to discover these laws. The object of our investigation is to find the processes by which certain stages of culture have developed. The customs and beliefs themselves are not the ultimate objects of our research. We desire to learn the reasons why such customs and beliefs exist -- in other words, we wish to discover the history of their development... ..by comparing histories of growth general laws may be found..."

"This [historical] method is much safer than the comparative method... because instead of a hypothesis on the mode of development, actual history forms the basis of our deductions."

"The great and important function of the historical method... [lies] in its ability to discover the processes which in definite cases led to the development of certain customs. If anthropology desires to establish the laws governing the growth of culture it must not confine itself to comparing the results of growth alone, but whenever such is feasible it must compare the processes of growth, and these can be discovered by means of studies of the cultures of small geographical areas."

### **Alfred Louis Kroeber**

"There is...an unavoidable gap between the ideal or "pure" picture of culture and the actuality of how this idea is lived out by the average adherent of culture... He who is really interested in the phenomena of culture knows that their ideal values always suffer in actual human living of them. But, at the same time, he knows that in apprehending cultures the most essential thing to apprehend is their values because without these he will not know either toward what the cultures are slanted or around what they are organized"

Like Boas, Kroeber advocated an historical approach to the study of culture. He said that

"...while a strictly scientific approach is generalizing and nomothetic, a historical approach is ideographic, in that it remains much more attached to the particular phenomena per se. Instead of dissolving them away into laws or generalizations, the historical approach preserves its phenomena, on whatever level it happens to be operating, and finds its intellectual satisfaction in putting each preserved phenomena into a relation of ever widening context with the phenomenal cosmos".

Unlike Boas and most of his other students, Kroeber accorded the individual little to no causal significance:

"Even though society is based upon a collection of individuals, these individuals play little role... [and] we must be ready... to ignore and suppress the individual, who from our angle of the understanding of culture is perhaps more often irrelevant and distracting than helpful..."

## Robert Lowie

Lowie the Boasian speaking:

"Culture is a thing sui generis [unique, individual] which can be explained only in terms of itself"

"A given culture is, in a measure, at least, a unique phenomenon. In so far as this is true it must defy generalized treatment, and the explanation of a cultural phenomenon will consist in a recital of its past history; or to put it negatively, it cannot involve the assumption of an organic law of cultural evolution that would necessarily produce the observed effect."

On the other hand, Lowie could also say things that sound almost like Morgan or Tylor:

"We may liken the progress of mankind to a man a hundred years old, who dawdles through kindergarten for eighty five years of his life, takes ten years to go through the primary grades, then rushes with lightening rapidity through grammar school, high school and college. Culture, it seems, is a matter of exceedingly slow growth until a certain threshold is passed, when it darts forward gaining momentum at an unexpected rate"

"Phenomena that persist in isolation from their original context are technically known as 'survivals' and form one of the most interesting chapters of ethnology... survivals show that there may be an organic relation between phenomena that have become separated and treated as distinct by the descriptive ethnologist. In such cases, one trait is the determinant of the other, possibly as the actually preceding cause, possibly as part of the same phenomenon in the sense in which the side of a triangle is correlated with an angle"

"It is true that American ethnologists have shown that in several instances like phenomena can be traced to diverse causes; that in short, unlike antecedents converge to the same point. However, at the risk of being anathematized as a person of utterly unhistorical mentality, I must register my belief that this point has been overdone and that the continued insistence on it by Americanists is itself an illustration of cultural inertia... Nevertheless, in contradistinction to my some of my colleagues and to the position which I myself once shared, I now believe that it would be *pusillanimous* [cowardly, timid] to shirk the real problem involved, and that in so far as any explanation admits the problem, any explanation is preferable to the flaunting of fine phrases about the unique character of cultural phenomena."

## Edward Sapir

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached"

## Benjamin Whorf

"...the background linguistic system (viz. grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity... Formulation of ideas is not just an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages... Thus all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar"