

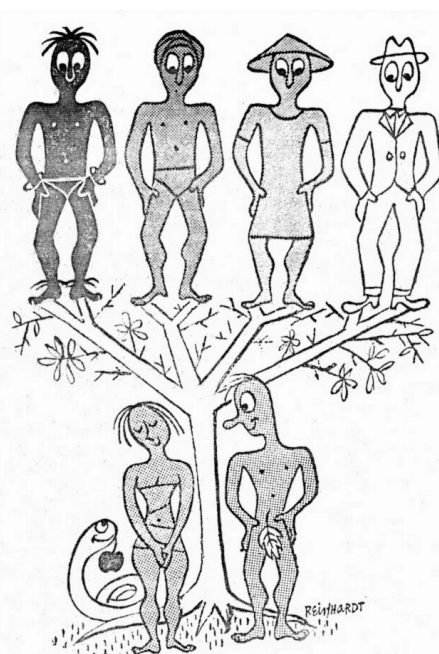
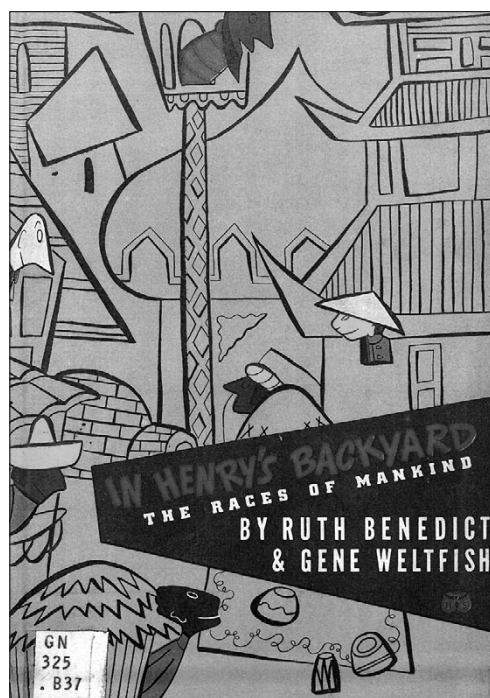
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

## Franz Boas and Anti-Racist Education

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"Schools Rebuked on Racial Errors! Prof Boas Charges Many Use Textbooks that Support Nazi Doctrine!" wrote an outraged *New York Times* on July 17, 1939. In the article, Franz Boas derides American schools for promoting false and potentially dangerous ideas about the concept of human race. His study of 160 high school textbooks in geography, history, civics and biology found that a majority (66%) of the books

fact, Boas' impact on educational politics and practice in New York was substantial enough to revise the way American teachers across the country came to speak and teach about human difference. With the development of the AAA's RACE Project, a public education initiative, anthropologists once again question how public schools shape perceptions of human difference. A historical perspective on the challenge of bringing anthropology to bear on broader questions of social justice and public education should be part of this initiative.



THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH ARE ONE FAMILY.

misused the race concept and an astounding 20% explicitly promoted the kind of white supremacy that mirrored Nazi racial doctrines.

"The myth of the 100 per cent 'Aryan' and similar nonsense has reached such proportions even in our own country that the fight against race prejudice is now a major problem for educators," Boas told reporters. He announced "a broad educational campaign" to be conducted by more than 50 of the nation's leading educators and scientists "against unscientific teaching of race problems in American schools."

Today, the story of Franz Boas' activism in race education has been largely forgotten. In

Here I consider Boas' political motivations for reforming the pedagogy of race, his most successful strategy for modernizing the race concept in schools and some of the challenges his educational activism engenders for anthropologists committed to anti-racist education today.

### NY Chamber of Commerce in 1939

Boas always defended academic freedom and public education as essential features of a democratic society. Politics in New York, however, inspired Boas to become a passionate advocate for local schools in 1939. At this time, the New York State Chamber of Commerce published

a series of polemical reports that, first insisted on the physical and intellectual supremacy of white Anglo-Saxons, and second employed this logic to cut educational funding for New York's working-class, racially stigmatized population. "Religion and health, in that order, are the two most important subjects that can be taught to American youth," the authors contended, especially in a metropolis like New York City.

The business elite demanded an end to state-funded kindergartens, high schools and universities and won a devastating \$10 million dollar budget cut to public education. The real blow to Boas was the so-called "science" employed to make these claims, *Conquest by Immigration*, written by eugenicist Harry H Laughlin and funded by the Carnegie Institute for publication in 1939. This was the same pseudo-science Boas devoted a lifetime of scholarship to undermining, and yet here it was, published by a reputable source to ravage public education.

The breadth of Boas' response to the Chamber of Commerce attack on public education is staggering. He held press conferences denouncing the reports and collected endorsements from major scientific organizations including the AAA for his critical pamphlet *Science Condemns Racism* (1939) that challenged Laughlin's report point by point. Boas organized teacher rallies, spoke on radio shows, put together a lecture panel at the 1939 World's Fair, and continued to speak on the subject even after the school budget was restored in 1940.

In 1941, Boas recalled furiously: "If I were to summarize the recommendations of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York I might say that they demand as aims: the teaching of humility, so that the poor may accept with gratitude what is given to them; health, that they may work effectively for their employer; ignorance, that they may not ask questions."

Questions of academic freedom, the scientific definition of race, and public education converged in Boas' mind, and he quickly devised a new strategy for safeguarding American democracy. American schools must reinforce the scientific definition of race from the inside out—a reform effort Boas recognized had potentially global consequences. Elderly, ill and fatigued, Boas turned to his students for help and found Ruth Benedict a willing collaborator to reform race education in America.

### The Races of Mankind

Boas marshaled support to overturn the budget cuts to New York public education in 1939, yet little of his activism directly impacted teachers until his students Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish published *The Races of Mankind* in 1943. Boas, a famously obtuse writer, asked Benedict to translate his ideas on race and culture for popular audiences. Written in a friendly, conversational style, this inexpensive pamphlet summarized Boasian views on race and culture. Despite the text's casual style, it grappled with some of the most polemical racial issues of the day, including race "mixing," monogenesis, the potential intelligence of blacks and the status of Jews as a racial minority.



The bright ones, as well as the strong ones, . . .



. . . come in all colors.

Teaching journals from the era reveal the tremendous popularity of *The Races of Mankind* in English, science and social studies classes across the nation. As publication approached one million copies, *The Races of Mankind* was released as an illustrated children's book, an animated film, a set of 15 posters and a traveling exhibit. It remains the most popular text written by an anthropologist for teachers and young students to clear up the confusion of the race concept in simple, inexpensive and appealing formats. *The Races of Mankind* would play a major role in transforming the way American teachers spoke and taught about the race concept. Most importantly, this text assured teachers and students that culture, not race, was the key to understanding human diversity.

**The Trouble With Culture**

Boas intended anthropology's non-essentialist culture concept to replace understandings of human difference as the result of innate, biological "race." The culture concept trickled down from anthropologists like Benedict to textbook authors and finally through teachers into the classroom. A review of textbooks and teaching journals from 1939 into the 1950s show, nonetheless, educators rarely applied the differences between race and culture that Boas promoted. Instead, educators typically viewed race and culture as synonymous. Well-meaning teachers had their students study "racial" minorities in terms of the positive cultural attributes that seemingly defined them. The result was a softer, culturalized notion of race that repro-

duced the dangerous, tautological generalizations Boas had rallied against in the first place.

Today there are too few opportunities for students to study the scientific definitions of race and culture in school. Boas and Benedict noted the same problem and created an inexpensive and popular way to bring anthropology into the hands of teachers and students. Among the lessons we can take from their efforts is that making this information free, accessible and relevant are necessary components to reforming the education of race.

Furthermore, we need to know that anthropological theories will be changed in practice as teacher educators, textbook authors and teachers themselves adapt the lessons to their particular needs. Thus, anthropologists must remain engaged with race education through outreach efforts that allow them to work directly with K-12 teachers.

Finally, as anthropologists produce useful explanations of race for school use, they must

be conscious of how these definitions impact educational policies. The debates over affirmative action, school desegregation, multicultural education and academic achievement shape the strategies and products of anthropological activism in the schools, and vice versa.

Boas and Benedict erred in the 1940s by assuming Americans would readily understand and accept cultural explanations for perceived racial difference. While anthropological concepts of race and culture are more refined and sophisticated today, they are also infinitely more complex. Translating these terms to help teachers combat racism is the legacy Boas left us—it remains to be seen if anthropologists are finally up to the task. ■

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**RACE Project—Up Close and Personal at Annual Meeting**

MARY MARGARET OVERBEY, PROJECT DIRECTOR  
RACE PROJECT

Like past annual meetings, numerous activities are planned for the 2006 AAA Annual Meeting in San José to acquaint and involve members in the AAA's RACE Project. This year, the RACE Project will be featured at AAA's exhibit booth. Key advisors and staff of the RACE Project will be on hand to talk to members about the public education effort. The Scholars' Preview website, information about the RACE exhibition and special preview materials will be available at the booth. A reception will be held on Friday, Nov 17, from 2–4 pm in the AAA booth in the exhibit hall.

The RACE Project is co-sponsoring at the annual meeting two sessions that focus on race. "Those People! The Shared Foundations of Contemporary Racist and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments," organized by Thomas Patterson, Yolanda Moses and Carlos Velez-Ibanez, will be held on Thursday, Nov 16 from 1:45–3:30 pm in Ballroom A5. The presidential session examines the ideologies, structures and processes underly-

ing racist and anti-immigrant discourses. The session features Jane Hill, Yolanda Moses, Carla Freeman, Carlos Velez-Ibanez, Michael Kearney and Josiah Heyman. Michael Blakey serves as session discussant.

"Critical Dangers and Opportunities for Anthropology and Education: Issues of Race and Class in Community Colleges," organized by Mark Lewine and Catherine Emihovich, will be held on Saturday, Nov 18, from 4–5:45 pm in Willow Glen at the Marriott. The session, sponsored by the AAA Anthropology and Education Committee, focuses on continued divisions based on race and class within academia and the communities in which we live. The session features Mark Lewine, Catherine Emihovich, Phillippe Bourgois, Kathryn Borman and Cynthia Ninivaggi.

As in past annual meetings, Yolanda Moses, chair of the RACE Project; key advisors, Michael Blakey, Faye Harrison, Alan Goodman, Robert Hahn, Janis Hutchinson, Carol Mukhopadhyay, Enid Schildkrout and I will be attending various section and committee meetings to report on project activities and outcomes. ■