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 decries 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 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 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.

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.
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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