

SCIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC INTEREST ANTHROPOLOGY: LESSONS FROM BOAS AND BOURDIEU

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Public Interest Anthropology (PIA) is an evolving paradigm for research and action which merges theory development with engagement in the dilemmas, inequities, and perplexities of our times. The research is interdisciplinary mixing the bifocality of ethnography and the determining power of culture with concepts such as *public[s]*, *interest[s]*, *public sphere*, and *civil society*. Departing somewhat from the relativism of contemporary cultural anthropology, public interest research includes assessments of the common good in terms of concepts like human rights, equity, democracy, peace, and sustainability. Like medical research devoted to understanding the bases for health and finding cures for disease, PIA studies the social and cultural processes by which public actions enhance or threaten the common good in an increasingly destabilized world marked by environmental depletion, the tyranny of the market, and a host of divisive social, economic and political issues.

Public interest anthropology can be distinguished from public and applied anthropology by its distinctive goal. PIA seeks no less than to reinvent anthropology for the 21st century by developing a common theoretical discourse and an epistemology linking research with action, and engagement in the multicultural context of a

globalizing world. The papers to follow take up various issues related to the evolving discourse. In this paper I focus on the social engagement part of PIA.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGEMENT

PIA does not take the hands off attitude common in cultural anthropology. Rather, the public-interest ethnographer sees herself as part of the world she studies not just as a participant-observer but as an engaged human being. A survey of the history of anthropology demonstrates that linking research and engagement with theory development and a concern for social issues is not new. From the inception of the field, socially engaged anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan and Franz Boas made a significant impact on their world and on the field of anthropology. George Stocking's (1968:233) claim that Boas "helped to transform both anthropology and the anthropologist's world" applies to the many anthropologists who followed in his footsteps and to social scientists in other countries such as Pierre Bourdieu.

My goal in this paper is to consider the meaning of engagement in PIA by taking a step backward to see what we can learn from this history. The basic point I want to make is that engagement mixed with a well-trained ability to adopt the bifocality of public-interest ethnography-- to observe closely and to translate observation into a broader conceptual framework touching on the common good-- is vital to the continuing evolution of anthropology as a science that makes a difference in the contemporary world.

To make this point, I focus on the work and thought of Franz Boas and Pierre Bourdieu as representatives of a way of thinking that spans more than a century. Boas and Bourdieu are rarely compared perhaps because they lived at different times in different countries and were associated with different theoretical frameworks. Yet they are strikingly alike in developing a science of society which had a public impact and which was fueled by a personal social passion. Boas articulated his social passion early in his career in a 1884 letter to his fiancé when he said: "What I want to live and die for is equal rights for all, equal possibilities to learn and work for poor and rich alike! Don't you believe that to have done even the smallest bit for this, is more than all science taken together?" (Jan. 24, 1884 cited by Cole in Stocking 1983:37.)

More than a century later, Bourdieu expressed his "solidarity with those who are now fighting to change society." Like Boas, Bourdieu was dedicated to using science to build a more humane society – "putting forward, in place of the abstract and limited knowledge" of social science, "a knowledge more respectful of human beings and of the realities which confront them" (Bourdieu 1998:28.)

FRANZ BOAS

The public issue which drew Boas' attention and with which he was deeply engaged was the thinking behind "evolutionary ethnology" such as found in the work of his contemporary, Daniel Brinton. Based on his ethnographic studies, Boas disagreed with public discussions about "racial heredity" and mental traits and argued for the determining power of tradition and custom. Although it was Boas' students who were responsible for elaborating the culture concept, Boas' claim that culture not race or evolution is the foundation for human diversity changed the way Americans thought about race as a scientific category. Although he did not succeed in abolishing racial discrimination, Boas provided the framework which undermined its intellectual foundation (see discussion in Stocking 1968:231;233; and more recently Handler 1998:458.) To this day, the Boasian framework competes with the racism and essentialism of modern times in its ability to shape public opinion, social thought and legal policy.

Boas' concern with freedom and human creativity is also central to a public-interest anthropology. Vacillating between the notion of culture as both tyrannical and the source of freedom, Boas pointed out that as much as people are subjected to "the tyranny of custom" (Benedict 1943:33) they are also creative agents in history. Although at the beginning of his career Boas emphasized how "the fear of tradition" regulates life and "halts progress for us," at the end of his life he spoke about the role of the anthropologist in breaking the determining forces of tradition and custom. In an international radio broadcast over NBC in 1941, he issued a plea for using science not just in the search for truth but for change as well. As he put it

We must do our share in the task of weaning the people from a complacent yielding to prejudice, and help them to the power of clear thought, so that they may be able to understand the problems that confront us all" (Boas 1969:1-2.)

According to Ruth Bunzel, by such statements, Boas demonstrates his belief "that man was a rational animal and could with persistent effort,

emancipate himself from superstition and irrationality.” “His object was the enlightenment of mankind through anthropology” (Bunzel 1962:6.) In my view this is an early statement of the goals of PIA and comes from Boas’s passion for social equality and democracy. It was a passion that was more important to him than “fame and glory.” “Empty glory means nothing to me,” he said. If fame were his only motive, he wrote at the beginning of his career, “I would have a low opinion of myself.” Although he is honest about wanting “external recognition for my achievements,” he adds that he wants “to be known as a man who will carry out his ideas and act upon them” (letter cited by Cole in Stocking 1983:17.)

PIERRE BOURDIEU

Reflexivity, engagement, recognition of the tyranny of social life, and a passion for social responsibility abound in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In the last decade of his life Bourdieu was outspoken in his engagement with “the public” and “the public interest.” In writing and talking about “the public interest,” he freely uses concepts like the “public good,” the “collective interest,” “collective responsibility,” and “civic virtue” (Bourdieu 1998:4-7.) He is blistering in his attack on intellectuals and politicians who “are terribly short of ideals that can mobilize people” (*ibid.*, p.5.) Whether one agrees with him or not, his ideas contributed to greater reflection, discussion, and debate in the public domain.

Bourdieu is not afraid to be either controversial or political. For example, writing against “the tyranny of the market,” he claims that the progressive “withdrawal of the state” and “submission to the values of the economy” is due to the climate created by the “new intellectuals.” The “return to individualism,” he says creates “a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy which tends to destroy the philosophical foundations of the welfare state and in particular the notion of collective responsibility (towards industrial accidents, sickness or poverty) which has been a fundamental achievement of social (and sociological) thought” (*ibid.*, pp 6-7.) Bourdieu decries this development and lashes out simultaneously at academics and politicians who encourage these trends.

Like Boas, Bourdieu sees humans as both imprisoned yet capable of freedom. In place of Boas’s “tyranny of custom,” he speaks of “social fields” which “necessitate the world.” He says that he is “often stunned by the degree to which things are determined” and comments, “believe me, I do not rejoice over this” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:19-20.)

Like Boas, Bourdieu believes that social science can be an avenue to freedom. What he calls “reflexive sociology” opens “the possibility of identifying true sites of freedom, and thus of building small-scale, modest, practical morals in keeping with the scope of human freedom,” however narrow it may be. He says that reflexive sociology teaches people to “know a little better what they are and what they do” by offering the means for people to think about themselves (B and W p.198.) These words are strikingly reminiscent of Boas’s plea in 1941 for anthropology to teach “the habit of clear thinking” so that people can develop a more rational understanding of themselves and others (Boas 1969:1-2.)

My sense from reading Bourdieu is that instilling the art of reflexivity and inserting his opinion into the public sphere of debate is more important to him than achieving glory for his theoretical developments. He is ultimately dedicated

to sociology as a reflexive science. I take the following words as a model for a reflexive public-interest anthropology in the 21st century.

I believe that when sociology remains at a highly abstract and formal level, it contributes nothing. When it gets down to the nitty gritty of real life, however, it is an instrument that people can apply to themselves for quasi-clinical purposes. The true freedom that sociology offers is to give us a small chance of knowing what game we play and of minimizing the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve, as well as by the embodied social forces that operate from within us. I am not suggesting that sociology solves all the problems in the world, far from it, but that it allows us to discern the sites where we do indeed enjoy a degree of freedom and those where we do not. So that we do not waste our energy struggling over terrains that offer us no leeway (B and W, pp. 198-99.)

CONCLUSION

From the careers of Boas and Bourdieu, I glean a lesson which I hope will become normalized in PIA practice. This is that the personal is social, political and scientific for engaged anthropologists committed to social problem solving. While I take this commitment to be the fuel that motivates a creative, vital anthropology others will dismiss it as political and hence unscientific. Herein lies the problem facing anthropology. While many of its practitioners are engaged; its institutional home in academic anthropology promotes a set of values which removes the political from science.

This is in part the legacy of positivism. For example, writing in 1968, a time when positivism flourished in anthropology, despite his obviously deep admiration of Boas, George Stocking (1968:149) seems to criticize the “young Boas” for intertwining “the political, the general intellectual, and the specifically scientific” so “that they are not easily separated.” He labels this “a single left-liberal posture which...is at once scientific and political.” (Stocking 1968:149.)

I can't say whether Stocking means these words as a statement of fact or a rebuke. Labeling someone left and liberal is the kiss of death in the academic world then and now. Academic anthropology has never seriously entertained the idea that its science is always to some extent political (but see Nader 2001, 2002; Borofsky 2002:474.) The issue is not to ignore the political component but to recognize its role. Removing the political altogether was the goal of “positivist social science.” The problem with this solution is that it removes the human content from researcher and the researched under the mistaken assumption that all is determined (see Calhoun 1995:20;35.) Anthropology needs an epistemology which combines theory development with engagement in the contemporary social world. Because of its distinctive approach – ethnography in many parts of the world – the epistemology must demonstrate how it is possible to move from the “native's point of view” to consider broader public issues which affect us all. PIA is an attempt to develop a common discourse for addressing these and other issues so as to reinvent anthropology for the 21st century. If one accepts the relevance of engagement than the reinvention process is essential to keep abreast with changing times. The

papers presented in this symposium highlight some of the pathways and the pitfalls of the road ahead as the discourse evolves.

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