

## ACADEMIA | Letters

### *Frans Boas' Bold Vision for New York City*

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Franz Boas, the German émigré who became known as the “Father of American Anthropology” for his invention of the four-field approach to anthropology, was also heavily involved in other causes.<sup>1</sup> He is perhaps best known for his data-driven attack on the notion of racial superiority, in which he was involved from the beginning of his career.<sup>2</sup>

Although most accounts of him of late have focused solely on his anthropology, he was much more than that.<sup>3</sup> He was one of the first scientists to realize the power of scientists speaking out politically.<sup>4</sup> The issues he cared about were varied; they included a fierce opposition to the entry of the United States into World War I, as well as perhaps his best-known political activity, his protection of the right of free speech, primarily through an organization he was instrumental in founding, the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom (ACDIF). The organization occupied him almost full time from his retirement from Columbia University in 1936 until his death in 1942.<sup>5</sup>

We often sanitize the political struggles of our well-known historical figures, scientific and otherwise, robbing us of an opportunity to know them as real flesh and blood people with

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<sup>1</sup>Stocking, G. W. (1977). The Aims of Boasian Ethnography: Creating the Materials for Traditional Humanistic Scholarship. *Histories of Anthropology Newsletter*, 4(2), 3.

<sup>2</sup>Stocking, G. W. J. (1968). The Critique of Racial Formalism. In *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology with a new preface 1968* (pp. 163–194). The Free Press.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example; Adams, W. Y. (2017). *The Boasians*. Hamilton Books; Zumwalt, R. L. (2019). *Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist*. University of Nebraska Press; Müller-Wille, L. (2014). *The Franz Boas Enigma: Inuit, Arctic, and Sciences*. Baraka Books.

<sup>4</sup>Kuznick, P. J. (1987). *Beyond the laboratory: scientists as political activists in 1930s America*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>5</sup>There is a rich history of this organization contained in a forthcoming book by the author. See, for example: ACDIF. (1939). *Statement of Principles and Program*. Boas Professional Papers, American Philosophical Society; ACDIF. (1938). *Science Manifesto*. Franz Boas Professional Papers, American Philosophical Society.

significant interests and political activities. This is a shame, as one of the features of many such people is their accessibility and involvement in their time's political and social currents. It is particularly true of Franz Boas. Though his passions did inform his science, they went well beyond that. Understanding those passions help us understand him as a whole person and further realize his influence.

He felt a loyalty to the places in which he lived, including New York City. The City was the home of the two institutions where he spent the bulk of his career and did much of his work, the American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University. His experiences in both places gave him insights into the workings of the City and its potential for improvement.

He was not afraid of embracing big ideas, neither in anthropology nor in his political life. In the proposal described below, rarely if ever before written about, Boas exhibited some of his strengths: his deep understanding of the connection between science and education, his willingness to consider fundamentally different ideas, and his commitment to actions that he thought beneficial to the body politic, particularly young people and students.

Therefore, 1914 found Boas writing George McAneny, President of the Board of Alderman of New York City. McAneny had married Marjorie Jacobi, daughter of Abraham Jacobi, Boas' political mentor, supporter, and friend. McAneny and Boas found they had very similar political ideas as both were very civics-minded. McAneny had an active political career, starting with reporting for the *New York World* on issues of civic reform. He became president of the City Club of New York, called by *The New York Times* "a social club with a civic purpose," and from there went on to become Manhattan Borough President, then President of the New York City Board of Aldermen, now called the New York City Council.

In two letters to McAneny, March 2 and May 25, 1914, and a proposal included in the March 2 letter, Boas put forward a plan that would have amounted to a sweeping reorganization of the scientific and intellectual life of the city.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting his deep experience with both the American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University – and the connections between them about which he learned when he was jointly appointed to both – as well as research into other city institutions, he sought to overcome the significant shortcomings in the overall intellectual life in the city he viewed as his home. (Even after he moved his family to New Jersey, he retained deep emotional ties to New York City.)

Referencing a meeting between the two on February 17, Boas explained the basis of his proposal. Stating that too often, the educational work of an institution had overshadowed its scientific or artistic work, he maintained that the two activities should be kept separate.

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<sup>6</sup>Boas, F. (1914). *Letters to George McAneny, NY Times, March 2 and May 25; DEVELOPMENT OF WORK IN SCIENCE AND ART IN NEW YORK CITY* (no date, probably 1914), Franz Boas Papers, New York Public Library.

He wrote that there was “an obvious relation between science teaching in the New York schools and the natural history collections in the museums of the City, and between history teaching and the collections of art. The work of the Board of Education might be considerably enriched by systematic cooperation with museums.” Pointing out that the museums were not readily available to students living a long subway ride away from their location, he went on to point out: “It is therefore worth considering whether several small museums could not serve the interests of the citizens better than constant enlargement of a few central buildings, where the schools, and particularly the branch libraries of the city, might not be utilized for this purpose, without creating the necessity of erecting many new expensive buildings or new museum wings.”<sup>7</sup> Boas was not thinking small here, as his suggestions and questions would lead to some fundamental changes. He laid out his conclusions in the following way:

1. How could the work of institutions devoted to science and art, and maintained in part by the city, be coordinated with the city’s general educational and scientific work?
2. What are the precise obligations of these institutions to the city?
3. What should be the relation of the City institutions to similar ones supported by private funds?

In the proposal enclosed in his March 2 letter, Boas put forward the “Establishment of a Department of two Boards – a Board of Science and Art, and a Board of Educational Development.” The boards were designed to overcome one of the critical failures, according to Boas, that afflicted the current condition of art and science, the lack of communication and even coordination among the various organizations, research institutes, museums, and the like. Boas himself had interests in a great many areas, art as well as science and education, and he was able to see the advantages of a commingling of efforts and activities.

He was highly enthusiastic about his proposal, writing: “I believe it hardly necessary to dwell on the powerful influences that might be exerted by the central Boards here suggested. It seems to me a very promising feature of a plan of this kind, that a centre consisting of experts would be created that might assist Boards of Trustees of co-operating institutions in the formulation of their policies in such a way that co-ordination with other institutions would be obtained.”<sup>8</sup>

McAneny quickly responded to this overture, writing to “My dear Franz” that he thought very well of his suggestions and thought that the main thing was to get the relation of the city

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Boas, F. (March 2, 1914) *Letter to G. McAneny*, Franz Boas Papers, New York Public Library.

to the institutions “properly adjusted.”<sup>9</sup> Noting the sweep of Boas’ ideas, he pointed out that this was not going to be easy, as it might well require a change in the city charter. He wanted to get the Board of Estimate and Apportionments involved, and a technical advisor to assist the Budget Committee. Although a letter from McAneny’s assistant did arrive, seeking advice from Boas on a letter inviting people to be on an advisory committee, there is no evidence of any further activity. Boas’ grand plan to further democratize the City’s educational effort, making the resources of the City more widely available to poor people and minorities, who tended to live far away from the museums of which Boas spoke, and therefore difficult to access for educational purposes remained just that, a potentially beneficial idea.

It is not hard to see why this idea arrived almost stillborn. As politically astute as Boas was in many areas, here he shows himself to be somewhat naive. Nowhere is there any evidence of his having talked to any of the organizations involved. He certainly does not indicate in any of his correspondence with McAneny that he has discussed his ideas with them. Although Boas might not have meant it this way, the proposed Boards smack of control; Boas himself speaks of “powerful influences that might be exerted.” He Boas demonstrated considerable overreach, if not arrogance. Whatever benefit the idea may have generated if implemented, it would never go anywhere without sophisticated political groundwork. It is likely that McAneny himself, an experienced politician, realized this and did not want to offend his friend.

Stillborn it may have been, but this visionary proposal says a lot about Boas as a public thinker. For one thing, underlying this idea was his firm notion of the equality of the races; opportunity and cultivation create genius, not racial or class characteristics. The proposal also speaks to the importance of collaboration between the arts and the sciences for effective public communication.

Boas was ahead of his time. One can only imagine the benefits that would have accrued to the citizens and students of New York City and its suburbs had this proposal, or even parts of it, been enacted. And there are still lessons that can be learned from his effort to understand how the complexity of the city’s resources can be brought to bear for the benefit of its residents.

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<sup>9</sup>McAneny, G. (1914). *Letter to Franz Boas*, Franz Boas Papers, New York Public Library.