

Cultural relativism and determinism; academic imperialism: Steckley
Chapter 2

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- Steckley: White Lies About the Inuit: Chapter 2, pp. 31-49
- Steckley introduces “Four Major White Figures”
 - Franz Boas: American anthropologist
 - Diamond Jenness: Canadian anthropologist and government official
 - Vilhjalmur Stefansson: American adventurer
 - Farley Mowat: Canadian writer of “subjective non-fiction”
 - All are interesting and important background for the book
 - but for us, the broader anthropological points mostly come up in the discussion of Boas
- Boas (1858-1942)
 - one of the founders of American anthropology
 - p. 32: a proponent of **historical particularism**
 - what is this point of view?
 - in opposition to **evolutionism** (now often called “**unilinear evolutionism**”)
 - the idea that all cultures evolve from a “primitive” state to an “advanced” one
 - as in savagery to barbarism to civilization
 - clearly an ethnocentric, even insulting viewpoint, placing ourselves as the only pinnacle of advancement towards which all others are still struggling...
 - the newer term “unilinear evolutionism” leaves the door open for other, less simplistic kinds of evolutionary thinking
 - by implying that what was wrong was the idea of a single, progressive line of evolution
 - not the idea of cultural evolution in itself
 - note that Steckley is again writing with an eye to the social production of knowledge
 - the reason for Boas’s emphasis on historical particularism was that it was a useful counterpoint to the obviously troubling view of evolutionism
 - useful (and new) ideas are often overstated in order to make the point
 - leaving it to later scholars to clean up the exaggerations and oversimplifications
 - Also notice that I have been emphasizing the importance of historical particularism in your case team presentations
 - I hope you can see from Steckley’s critique how to use this approach more moderately and responsibly
 - old schools of thought often don’t go away: they just get toned down and demoted to genuinely helpful intellectual tools
 - Marxism, functionalism, and many others
 - p. 33: used the **ethnographic present**
 - two senses:
 - 1. set in the time of the fieldwork, freezing that as the present in the ethnography
 - 2. written in the present tense, to put the reader in that time, as if it were now, when the ethnography is being read

- results in ethnographies written about an imagined or reconstructed time before any outside contact
 - which is necessarily a fiction
 - ignores known, real, often very influential contacts
- also results in ethnographies written as though the culture were static and unchanging, forever the same in that ethnographic present
- derived from a “salvage” approach to ethnography
- trying to document the “pristine” culture before it got too contaminated by outside influences
- assumes that there IS such a thing as an independent, uncontaminated culture in the first place
- “romanticized timelessness”
- ignores things like the traumatic effects of introduced diseases, or the stresses of living under colonial domination, or the impact of labor or production for outsiders (like whalers in the Inuit case) and acquisition of goods from them
- pp. 33-35: Collecting bones and skulls, even 6 living Inuktitut
 - who were hospitalized within a month, and of whom 4 were dead in about 6 months
 - bodies collected by the American Museum of Natural History
 - Alfred Kroeber published on one of their brains
 - and replayed practically the same story with Ishi at UC Berkeley
- pp 35-36:
 - Boas was a proponent of **cultural relativism**
 - the idea that cultures are best understood in their own terms, relative to their own physical and social context
 - one should ask, “why does this make sense to them?”
 - the practices of the Inuit are effective and civilized in their context, while ours might not work so well there; and vice versa
 - he used this viewpoint to oppose **scientific racism**
 - which includes the idea that behavior (culture) is innate, inborn, unchangeable
 - “The Andean Highlander is stubborn”, as though this were a genetic trait, rather than a cultural one, or an understandable response to the situation they are in
 - but he went further, into **cultural determinism**
 - emphasized that “primitive” people are practically controlled by their culture
 - unlike us, they are not free to choose how they play the game of life given their culture’s network of ideas, values, roles, etc.
 - but rather, they simply do what their culture requires them to do
- Steckley calls this “**culturism**”, which is similar to “**racism**”
 - differing mainly in the notion that culture is learned (mostly at an early age), while racial characteristics are supposedly inborn to all members of a racial category
 - both are virtually irresistible forces after that
 - culturism grants the culture some respect as being reasonable for its context
 - but still fails to grant the individual the respect owed to a thinking person with free will
- Again, Steckley is explaining ideas in terms of the social creation of knowledge

- cultural relativism was a useful tool with which to oppose racism
- culturism was the exaggerated form that cultural relativism initially took in order to win the larger intellectual battle
- p49: academic colonialism and exploitation
 - how did Boas support a colonialist, exploitative approach to the Inuit, intentionally or not?
 - what about Stefansson, Jenness, Mowat?
 - how should we judge them?
 - Steckley reminds us to avoid **presentism**
 - judging something or someone in the past as though it were in the context of the present
- Useful footnote (literally)
 - the phrase “true _____” is often a tip-off to ethnocentrism, since it generally implies that the speaker’s construction of some idea is the essential, correct one for everyone, since other forms deviate from the “true” one.
- Points for you in the twenty-first century:
 - strive to be a cultural relativist
 - without being a cultural determinist
 - recognize the importance of historical particulars
 - without denying the possibility of cultural evolution
 - avoid treating cultures as independent, isolated, and unchanging
 - avoid writing in the ethnographic present
 - writing in the past tense reminds us that we are talking about a specific moment in time, understandable with reference to the particulars of that moment in history...
- Be aware of colonial exploitation
 - even by academics and others, including yourself