

Book Review
Citizen Boas by Alan H. McGowan
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Most members of the public – and at least a few scientists – appear to believe that science provides a pure glimpse into the truth, untethered by the messy issues that dominate daily life like jobs, our relations with other people, politics, and education. In this rosy view, not only the conclusions of scientific inquiry but how that newly acquired knowledge should be applied in the real world exist in a bubble. History declares this belief as poppycock! As Galileo was said to mutter when the Church forced him to recant his assertion that the planets revolved around the sun, “And yet they move!”

Recent American political debate demonstrates that this tension between the questions that scientists explore and the political beliefs of many people still are at war with one another. One only has to think of views on vaccination, with Anthony Fauci and other experts denounced by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. for causing childhood autism, and thousands of individuals and legislative bodies urging resistance to Covid vaccinations.

If the scientific method – which never declares that it has revealed the final, ultimate truth about any question, instead treating all conclusions as hypotheses subject to revision or refutation by later acquired knowledge – is difficult for many to accept when the subject is metallurgy or chemistry, the chasm between the scientific method and popular understanding is even greater when the subject is humanity. Each of us knows what it’s like for us to be human; we generalize from our own experience and form beliefs and create policies that are both untested and hard to dislodge. We read that a few teenagers get in trouble and we conclude that it’s imperative to clamp down on all teenagers; we experience a terrible fire and we mandate expensive precautions universally. Most troublingly, we assume that our point of view, drawn from our limited personal experience constitutes a universal truth.

Perhaps no area of science is more subject to this fallacy of finding specious generalities in the midst of complex realities than anthropology. Early contacts between scientifically inclined explorers from Europe and people living elsewhere in the world led to a theory that humanity existed as part of a near linear progression starting with the apes, through African and Australian tribesmen, to the pinnacle of the Oxford educated London dandy dressed in velvet, sipping claret, and discussing Proust. Not surprisingly this Euro-centric distinction between ‘noble savages’ and ‘civilized Europeans’ provided pseudo-scientific cover for institutionalized racism.

Into this debate stepped a German-born American anthropologist, Franz Boas, the subject of *Citizen Boas*, a fascinating new book by Alan McGowan. McGowan is uniquely qualified to write about how Boas and his students shifted both scientific and popular views, undercutting arguments based on presumed racial superiority Boas was not only a scientist but also a citizen.

McGowan himself is a powerhouse in ensuring that the best available scientific information is inserted into public debates. He founded and led Scientists Institute for Public Information (SIPI), a non-profit that for many years worked as a clearinghouse for journalists writing on matters where good science could help inform or shape public policies. Reporters could call SIPI and within hours be put in touch with the leading researchers in a field to guide and clarify their reporting on scientific matters. In this sense, Citizen McGowan helped inform public policy, just as Citizen Boas had done decades earlier. (Full disclosure: I was a board member at SIPI for many years and have remained in touch with McGowan after SIPI closed operations.)

Boas' work began as a geographer with expeditions to Baffin Island in Canada, and that experience inevitably threw him into close contact with the native inhabitants of the region. Overcoming his initial distaste for the sights and sounds of arctic villages, he began to understand and appreciate what he observed. McGowan's portrait of Boas is of a man intellectually curious and engaging, attracting as friends and colleagues those accompanying him on field trips as well as important allies in New York City and elsewhere. But he could also be difficult and stubborn, closing off pathways that a more flexible person might have used for advancement.

The book traces the advances and byways of Boas' career, which culminated in his joining the faculty of Columbia University in 1899. From that point until his death in 1942, his influence grew, not in small part because of the cadre of talented students he gathered around him. Notably for the time, a number of the most prominent were women who informally called him Papa Franz. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Zora Neale Hurston each blossomed into public figures, their work helping students and readers rethink the values and structures of human society.

Readers may be surprised by the baked-in racism that pervaded American science at the time. Although McGowan writes about the ups and downs of Boas' career, his influence as a teacher, and his deep involvement in creating the American Century of scientific dominance, it is his immersion in racial politics that forms the centerpiece of the book. McGowan writes,

Boas believed in "citizenship." That is to say, he felt that every citizen, including himself, should participate in America's democracy. He came to his adopted country full of enthusiasm for its ideals and principles, and although he was to become disappointed and a bit disillusioned after he arrived, he never lost faith. He spent a good deal of time and effort trying to get America to live up to its ideals. He fought for people to have freedom of speech and opportunity; once they had them, he thought they ought to be used for the betterment of all. His actions showed how he put those principles to work.

A defining moment in Citizen Boas' active life was his acceptance of an invitation from W.E.B. DuBois in 1906 to travel to Atlanta University for a lecture. Despite some hesitation – and a flawed first appearance where Boas repeated an old trope that Negro brains were smaller, he redeemed himself with an address the next day in which he laid out his fundamental belief that no one race or civilization was inherently superior to another. McGowan points out,

In an American society dominated by racial hierarchy—one that openly denigrated Black citizens for stupidity, backwardness, and ignorance—such an address was a radical event. Not only was previous African civilization not inferior to its European counterpart, it was actually superior in many ways. Not only did humans themselves arrive out of Africa, but so, Boas implied, did the notion of civilization itself. He went on: “Shall I remind you of the power of military organization exhibited by the Zulu, whose kings and whose armies swept southeastern Africa? Shall I remind you of the local chiefs, who by dint of diplomacy, bravery and wisdom united the scattered tribes of wide areas into flourishing kingdoms, of the intricate form of government necessary for holding together the heterogeneous tribes?”

Thus dipping his toe – and then his whole body – into the then-controversial subject of the comparative talents and worth of any one group of humans, Boas expanded his thesis. Germans, reviled after the end of World War I should not, he believed, be punished as a group for the excesses of their leaders. (Most historians now agree that the Treaty of Versailles planted the seeds of World War II.) He was a staunch believer in pacifism, urging that humans find other ways to solve differences and refrain from creating categories of friends vs. enemies. It is fair to conclude that he would find modern American politics distasteful to the extreme.

The book is rich with details about swaths of public policy and belief where Boas had strong feelings, always welcoming diversity of belief so long as it was accompanied by respect for difference and appreciation of the effect that culture could have on individual viewpoints. At times, McGowan may excuse apparent timidity by Boas in failing to confront prejudice with a full throated voice. One occasionally yearns for Boas to speak up more sharply. But these lapses are understandable given the world as it existed. Overall, there is no doubt that he took seriously his obligation to vigorously defend individual and group differences.

Readers who know little about the role that comparative ethnography has played in defending a multi-racial, multi-cultural society will come away from McGowan’s book with a deep appreciation for Papa Franz and his disciples. Perhaps the most important lesson found in this book is that scientists cannot avoid being entangled in controversial matters of public policy. Not only are they scientists, they are citizens. McGowan has shown us the power of an engaged Citizen Scientist.