

Review of “Citizen Boas: A Life in Science and Politics”

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Alan McGowan's book *Citizen Boas* is an important read for anyone concerned with the roots of today's environmental justice movement. There are clear connections between various strands of Boas' life and thought and contemporary socioenvironmental issues. We recognize now that Indigenous Knowledge about the environment has been ignored at everyone's cost. Programs to gather the knowledge of indigenous cultures are springing up worldwide. They are ultimately necessary because, as Virchow (a crucial early influence on Boas) noted, the 19th century worldview included an "expectation almost without exception that one would find a climbing row of lower to higher ethnic stocks and races." Boas was instrumental in beginning to dismantle that worldview. Before his early and formative trip to Baffin Island, in McGowan's words Boas (still a graduate student in physics) revealed his early ideas when he noted that he "would investigate the relation of peoples, migration and the environment... through a comparative study of different Inuit groups' knowledge of their neighbors and landscape." As McGowan says, Boas' expedition would "ultimately... reverberate throughout anthropology and ultimately the world itself."

Regretfully skipping over some sections on a number of Boas' studies of indigenous cultures in British Columbia, and Boas' roles at Clark University, and in the origins of the Field Museum in Chicago, the section on Boas' influence at the then-beginning American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University describes his importance in establishing an anthropology with the potential to engage with the physical environment and to increasingly respect Indigenous Wisdom.

Focusing on Boas' connections to what have become or remain pressing issues today, at the turn of the 20th century Boas supported colleagues from yet another expedition who were working (then unsuccessfully) to assist what we know as Canada's First Nations to establish sovereign rights to "land holding, fishing rights and other matters concerning the lives of the natives" but decisions of the Canadian Supreme Court favorable to that cause did not begin to accumulate for another century (Thomas and Saik'uz First Nation vs Rio Tinto Alcan, Inc., 2022, Delgamuuk-Gidsay'wa vs British Columbia, 1997, and a trilogy of cases in 2004 and 2005 involving the Haida Nation, Taku River Tlinget Nation, and Mikisew Cree First Nation (among other decisions). Boas' thought provided the origins of the force needed to break down barriers to environmental justice in Canada and globally.

After one of Boas' many clashes over his perspective with figures in authority he left museum life and became a full time faculty member at Columbia University, McGowan chronicles his prescient worldview then, one Boas quote worth noting from that time is "Our inclination at the present time is to undervalue the lines of thought that have led to cultures different from our own, and I believe that in the best interests of our culture we should try to counteract this tendency towards a one-sided valuation..."

Black lives matter, and McGowan chronicles Boas' fierce anti racism and activism. This facet of Boas' life anticipated the environmental justice struggles of our present day, and brought him

influence in the Black Press in the US, and into contact with W. E. B. Du Bois (who "had laid a foundation for sociological inquiry into the social inequality experienced by the Black community") and led to his 1906 commencement address in the Jim Crow era, at Atlanta University (of which Du Bois wrote, the address "recounted the history of black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years"). Boas and his students at Columbia University (including Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, who in part "fundamentally changed our attitudes towards race and gender") and many others, were the foundation of a new vision for anthropology, but Boas especially carried that into action in a way that infused in unrecognized ways the current struggles from Flint, Michigan to Gordon Plaza to Cancer Alley to the Dakota Access Pipeline and myriad other places in the US and globally.

Boas' life and thought are important for people grappling with issues of environmental justice, racial justice, indigenous sovereignty, or gender and justice, and McGowan has written a thoughtful and enjoyable book about Boas that is important reading.