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Mead, Bateson, and "Hitler's Peculiar Psychological Makeup": Applying Anthropology in the Era of Appeasement

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin

Margaret Mead

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SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Middle American Indian Manuscripts in the Tozzer Library

John M. Weeks, Librarian at the Tozzer Library and Research Associate in Middle American Ethnohistory at the Peabody Museum, has just published Middle American Indians: A guide to the Manuscript Collection at Tozzer Library, Harvard University (Garland Press, New York). The volume consists of 856 entries describing various manuscripts, including the ethnographic and archaeological field diaries of Harvard anthropologists. In addition to a substantial introduction, there are indices by personal name, place name and subject.

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Mead, Bateson, and 'Hitler's Peculiar Psychological Makeup'-- Applying Anthropology in the Era of Appeasement

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin
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In the spring of 1939, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead returned to New York City from almost three years of intensive fieldwork in Bali and New Guinea. Much of their research represented an attempt to synthesize their interests and the two national anthropological traditions they represented. A student of Boas, Mead had used the three years to deepen her understanding of the relationship between culture and character formation. Trained in Great Britain, and the son of a geneticist, Bateson unsurprisingly demonstrated an affinity with the methods of natural science--although his epistemological concerns distinguished him from less questioning British anthropological colleagues.

The confluence of their interests went back to the time of their meeting in 1932 on the Sepik River in New Guinea, where (along with Mead's second husband, Reo Fortune), they responded to issues raised by Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture. The three anthropologists then worked out some preliminary formulations of the relationship between culture and personality, hypothesizing that different cultures selected among different temperaments preferred stylizations for the behavior of the two sexes. Mead later formalized this interpretation in Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935); Bateson, in Naven (1936) treated the cultural stylization of gender related personality traits within the specific context of ritual transvestism. Bateson, however, soon turned his attention away from individual personality to the theoretical implications of

the interaction between individuals or groups of individuals (Mead 1977: 178).

According to Mead, she and Bateson had originally chosen Bali as the site for the fieldwork they undertook after their marriage in 1936 on the presumption that it would provide a fourth example of cultural variation of gender and temperament. But although both of them began their Balinese research interested in questions of individual character formation, Bateson's work departed quickly from the original agenda--and now even further from his British colleagues. Substituting a more dynamic, circular interactional scheme for their static theories of adaptation or harmonic integration, he confronted the question: why was it that this society, or any other, did not just explode? Why was it that "vicious circles" did not develop in which the tensions between two opposing persons, or two opposing groups (even nations), increased to the breaking point? Bateson assumed that two opposing forms of "schismogenesis" (symmetrical and complementary) accounted for the "dynamic equilibrium" of social systems. Bateson expected his idea of "schismogenesis," later defined as "positive feedback," could be applied not only to the development of cultures, but more generally to human behavior, including "the progressive maladjustment of neurotic and prepsychotic individuals." Some individuals, he believed, might be better aided by insights into "on-going escalating relations" than they would be by more historically oriented psychoanalysis (Bateson 1936:175, 179, 181-822; Mead 1972:235-36).

In Bali and in New Guinea (to which they returned for further fieldwork in 1938), Mead continued to concentrate upon the "processes by which a particular cultural character" developed, treating individual socialization as a means to determine the underlying psychological patterns of the whole culture. Examining the interactions between mothers and infants, for example, as prototypes for future patterns of behavior, she suggested that the unresponsive and distant Balinese mother, typifying the relationships characteristic of the culture, produced impersonal distant children. The results of this approach were published in a jointly authored volume on Balinese Character (1942); and Bateson was later to publish work on the democratic and authoritarian personality types which was based on ideas he had developed in Bali about habits of learning.

While in the field, Mead and Bateson thus drew on their overlapping individual intellectual perspectives to demonstrate the relationship between child development and character formation, the congruence between infant experience and broad cultural patterns. Invested with a new dynamism by Bateson's notions of interaction, circularity and learning theory, Mead's work on culture and personality informed their continuing collaborations and their individual projects. But the synthesis they created in Bali was to make its first public appearance, as it were, in a theatre of international politics.

Neither Mead nor Bateson had demonstrated much active interest in the political scene before World War II. Despite her strong reform impulses, Mead later reported that she simply did not have the time; the demands of professional life and fieldwork consumed her. Bateson, for most of his life, was downright hostile to political reform and negative about applied social science; even during the 1930s, when many of his colleagues were attracted by leftist and utopian ideas, he remained indifferent. But from the time the two had returned from Bali, they had, as Mead later recalled, "realized that Hitler presented a terrible threat to everything we valued in the world" (BBWD:3). Since neither of them had been "caught up in the fashionable radicalism of the 1930s with its roseate views of the Soviet Union," they did not suffer "the paralysis that crippled so many liberals who were stunned and confused by the [1939] Soviet-German pact" (Mead 1942:xxvi). Within two days of the signing of the pact, they wrote to the wife of the President of the United States to propose steps that her husband might take to prevent the outbreak of war.

Mead's mother, Emily Fogg Mead, had met with Mrs. Roosevelt at Hyde Park on her social reform missions; perhaps, then, Mead felt it was not entirely inappropriate to approach the President's wife as her mother had already done. But since Bateson was still a British subject, the letter, although jointly composed, was signed by Mead alone. Suggestive of the power which the two young anthropologists invested in their discipline, this remarkable document demonstrates an early effort by the two anthropologists to apply theories and conclusions reached in the field to practical politics--at a moment in time when many people still hoped that war might be averted. Mead examines Hitler's individual behavior from her perspective as psychological anthropologist; Bateson's study of social systems ever threatening to go awry found ready application in their suggestion for a policy that would work with Hitler's peculiar psychological make-up rather than resist it.

August 25, 1939

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
Hyde Park, New York

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am addressing this letter to you because of the courageous and imaginative definiteness with which you have accepted the responsibilities of leadership during the last years in the United States. I wish to present to you a concrete suggestion for a way in which the President of the United States might cut the Gordian knot of the present world crisis. I venture to make this suggestion because in this moment of world emergency every

individual effort seems justified; I make it, however, as a professional anthropologist, for what it is worth, to one who is in a position to use it constructively, in the interests of peace.

The proposal which I wish to make is based on the following assumptions:

1. That it would be desirable to return to the spirit of the Fourteen Points, to admit that the Treaty of Versailles was a lamentable failure which has been responsible for the present distressed state of Europe, and that there is an urgent need for a new attempt to organize the nations of the world.

2. That the President of the United States is the most appropriate leader to make the first moves in this direction, in view of the isolation of the United States from the present conflict and the strategic importance of the United States, especially since the recent German-Russian pact.

3. That the most efficient device that could be used to halt the present march towards destruction would be to enlist Hitler actively on the side of peace.

Psychiatrists and political scientists have discussed the role of Hitler's peculiar psychological make-up in European affairs; this is a proposal to actually use that make-up, so that the President, acting within the accepted diplomatic frame within which the Head of one State may appeal directly to the Head of another, would nevertheless be using Hitler's special psychology as an instrument upon which he was subtly playing. This procedure would be in line with the President's previous appeals to Hitler, but it would differ from them to the extent that in his previous appeals the President has treated Hitler as he might treat any great leader, not in terms of Hitler's very special picture of himself.

The points about Hitler's psychology which might profitably be born in mind would be these:

1. No threat, however veiled, of disapproval or of active opposition to Hitler's plans will deter him. Rather, threats stimulate his peculiar psychology to greater efforts and produce exactly the opposite of the desired effect.

2. No appeal to Hitler NOT to do something has any effect because he sees himself as a man of action, a man who is making continuous, constructive and fearless efforts. Therefore no appeal to him NOT to fight, NOT to precipitate war, can work. The only way to divert him from an undesirable course is to divert him TOWARDS a desirable one which can be represented as MORE active, MORE constructive, MORE magnificent than the course which it is desired that he abandon.

3. Hitler cannot accept any condemnation of his role, or of the acts which he has performed in that role, because in his conception of himself as a Man of Destiny, he has made his role identical with his God, [and] to criticize it becomes a blasphemy. Therefore, in appealing to him, a device must be found which will put his past acts, including the rearmament of Germany, into a moral setting. This could be done by suggesting that the rearmament of Germany was (a) inevitable as the result of the Versailles Treaty and (b) the means by which that Treaty can now be set aside and the world be freed to return to the spirit of the Fourteen Points which he, Hitler, has himself invoked within the last few days.

4. Hitler must feel that he is making the plans. He is exceedingly astute and resourceful in working out the implications of a role once he has embraced it. If the President were able to suggest to him a course of action by which he, Hitler, without repudiating any of his past acts, but in fact still glorying in them, could move on to greater fields, and if the President, furthermore, could provide the framework--abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles and a new order in which all the Nations of Europe would meet to right the inequalities of that Treaty and establish a new organization-- and leave Hitler ample room to work out the details, then Hitler would have a sufficient sense of his own active part in working out a course.

5. Hitler has a special interest in building. The symbol of the architect has compelling power over him. Any appeal which suggests that he has a chance to build a structure for all Europe, as he has already built at home, should have an irresistible appeal for him.

So, my concret proposal is that it would be possible for the President to profoundly effect the course of present events in Europe by framing a suggestion to Hitler based upon these peculiar aspects of Hitler's psychology in which the President would: affirm that the Treaty of Versailles had been unjust, contrary to the spirit of the Armistice and had doomed Europe to twenty troubled years; that Hitler's re-arming of Germany had been the logical outcome, that he shared Hitler's detestation of the terms of Versailles and Hitler's desire to return to the Fourteen Points as a basis of negotiations, that he believed that Hitler, himself, was the European leader who, by virtue of his great, constructive efforts to build up his own country, had the chance now to build the peace of all Europe; that he profoundly hoped that Hitler would not be forced to lose this chance for a constructive building of European peace by the machinations of any country who failed to understand his genuine urge towards constructiveness and peace and his desire for peaceful, bloodless solutions of the inequalities of the present condition; that the time had come when Hitler could lead the nations of Europe towards the disarmament, which might proceed pari passu with territorial readjustment, [and] might in fact achieve the task which the Allied leaders FAILED to achieve in 1919.

I have worked on these suggestions in the light of my field experience of simpler social systems. I present them for what they may be worth as a strictly private contribution to the cause of Peace.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Mead

Although she corresponded with Mead several times during the war years about matters of anthropology and public policy, there is no record that Mrs. Roosevelt replied to this letter--perhaps because within a week of its composition, Hitler's invasion of Poland rendered irrelevant the idea of substituting psychological for territorial appeasement. Concerned that an Axis victory would "set science back a hundred years" (Bateson 1984:23), the two anthropologists soon found themselves involved in preparedness efforts, using their anthropological skills to save democracy from totalitarianism. After Pearl Harbor, Mead went to Washington, where she became formally involved in government service as the executive secretary of the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits. Bateson ultimately found his place working with the Office of Strategic Services; stationed in Asia, he used his notions of circular systems to plan propaganda measures against the enemy.

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Margaret Mead's papers are in the manuscript archives of the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. The letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, reproduced with the permission of The Institute of Intercultural Studies, Inc. is in the General Correspondence file. BBWD in the parenthetic notes refers to the draft of Blackberry Winter in the Publications File.

BIBLIOGRAPHICA ARCANA

I. L'Homme des lumières et la découverte de l'autre

Under this title Daniel Droixhe and P.-P. Gossiaux have edited a volume in the series Études sur le xviii^e siècle (University Libre de Bruxelles) deriving from a session on anthropology at the VI^e Congrès International des Lumières held in Brussels in July of 1983. The table of contents is as follows:

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II. GRADHIVA

Using the acronym of its Groupe des Recherches et d'Analyses Documentaire sur l'Histoire et les Variations de l'Anthropologie, the newly established Département d'Archives de l'ethnologie of the Musée de l'Homme is beginning a Revue semestrielle d'histoire et d'archives de l'anthropologie. Directed by a committee consisting of Michel Izard, Jean Jamin and Michel Leiris, GRADHIVA will include original articles and essays, documentary materials, reviews, research reports, etc. Individual subscriptions outside France will cost 150 francs a year. In addition, GRADHIVA plans to publish editions of book length works (including a translation into French of James Clifford's biography of Maurice Leenhardt), as well as reissues of anthropological classics (including works by Demeunier, Paulme, Peron, Quatrefages and Hamy).

III. Recent Dissertations

(Ph. D. except where M.A. indicated)

Estevez, Fernando. "Indigenismo, raza y evolution en el pensamiento antropologico canario en los siglos xviii y xix" (Universidad de la Laguna, Canary Islands, 1985).

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Mauviel, Maurice. "L'idée de culture et de pluralisme culturel (aspects historiques, conceptuels et comparatifs)" (Université de Paris-René Descartes [Sorbonne], 1984).

IV. Recent Work by Subscribers

[Note that we do not list "forthcoming" items. To be certain of dates and page numbers, please wait until your works have actually appeared before sending citations or, preferably, offprints. Henceforth, we will use the same citational style as that used in History of Anthropology and most anthropological journals]

Dexter, Ralph W. 1985. Contributions of F. W. Putnam (1839-1915) to archaeoethnobiology. J. Ethnobiology 5:135-41.

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C.F.F. = Christian F. Feest
 F.S. = Frank Spencer
 G.W.S. = George W. Stocking
 R.D.F. = Raymond D. Fogelson

GLEANINGS FROM ACADEMIC GATHERINGS

September, 1985: New Zealand Association of Social Anthropologists-- The 10th conference, at Massey University, included a paper by James Urry entitled "From 'Facts' to Argument: Structure and Function in the History of Ethnographic Writing in the British Tradition, 1890-1940."

November 7-10, 1985: American Society for Ethnohistory-- The annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, included several sessions of interest to historians of anthropology. Among the papers on "Early Ethnohistorical Figures and Prefigurations" was one by Elizabeth Tooker (Temple University) on "Lewis H. Morgan and his Contemporaries"; another, by Joseph B. Herring (Texas Christian), dealt with the ethnographic work of Presbyterian Missionaries among Iowa and Sac Indians. There were two sessions on the life and work of Fray Bernardino de Sahagun.

November 28-30, 1985: Centre Culturel Francais de Rome--As part of a series on "La France des années trente," a colloquium was held on "Les Intellectuels sur le terrain: Renouveau et rayonnement de l'Ethnologie française." Included among the participants were Denise Paulme, Vittorio Lanternari, and Bertrand Pulman.

February 13-15, 1986: Association of Social Anthropologists-- The Museum Ethnographers' Group of the A.S.A. sponsored a symposium entitled "'Making Exhibitions of Ourselves': Limits of Objectivity in the Representation of Other Cultures." Held at the British Museum, the symposium attracted more than 40 papers, including many with historical themes. Among those listed in the advance announcement were those by Burton Benedict ("The Representation of Colonial Peoples in International Exhibitions"), Margaret Holm ("Moulding the Image of the American Indian: A History of Ethnology Exhibits at World's Fairs"), Jonathan King ("A Century of Indian Shows: A Comparison of Canadian and United States Exhibitions in London between the 1820s and 1920s"), Partha Mitter ("Paganism Not Yet Revealed: Western Images of Hinduism in the 16th and 17th Centuries"), Elizabeth Edwards ("Photography and Anthropology in the Mid-Nineteenth Century"), Robert Rydell ("Eugenics Exhibits at American Fairs and Museums Between the World Wars"), William Chapman (on Pitt Rivers), Mick Gidley (on Edward Curtis). It is expected that a volume will eventuate.

March 13-14, 1986: Arizona State Museum, Tucson--In connection with an exhibit on "Women Anthropologists in the Southwest, 1880-1980," Barbara Babcock and Nancy Parezzo organized a symposium entitled "Daughters of the Desert." In addition to a keynote overview by Louise Lamphere, there were concurrent panel discussions on archeology, museums, cultural and applied anthropology, and on photographers, novelists and artists.

April 1-2, 1986: Memorial to Bronislaw Malinowski--Held at Yale University, the program included papers by A. Paluch (Cracow) on "Malinowski: A Child of Polish Modernism"; Peter Skalnik (University of Cape Town): "Malinowski on War, Nationalism, and the State: The Yale Years"; Feliks Gross (New York): "Malinowski's Formative Years"; Michael Young (A. N. U.): "Black Islands Blues: Malinowski in Mailu"; Ronald Waterbury (Queens College): "Malinowski in Oaxaca." There was also a panel discussion on "Malinowski at Yale" by a number of people who had contact with him during his stay at that institution.

June 11-14, 1986: Cheiron (International Society for the History of the Behavioral and Social Sciences)--The program for the 1986 meeting, to be held at the University of Guelph, Ontario, includes a paper by Joy Harvey (Harvard) on "National and International Models in 19th Century Anthropology."

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Conference on The Method and Theory of the History of Archaeology

To be held at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in April, 1987, this conference will bring together leading scholars of the history of archaeology to discuss the processes and contexts of researching and writing about archaeology's past. Topics to be discussed include the problems and possibilities of various data sources (e.g. oral history, correspondence, field notes, etc.) as historical evidence, the differences in research methods between the different genres of the history of archaeology (e.g., biography, institutional history, regional history, etc.), the influences of information and misinformation about the past upon current archaeological research, the biases that affect the writing of the history of archaeology, the place of the history of archaeology in the history of science, and the significant individuals, events, and ideas in the history of archaeology that have been neglected. The two-day conference is being organized by Andrew L. Christianson. Persons interested in proposing papers or wanting more information should contact him after September 1, 1986 at the following address: Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901--tel. # (618) 536-5529.