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CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Franz Boas (a.k.a. Boaz) and the F. B. I.

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For those involved in the history of anthropology, the mere fact that the Federal Bureau of investigation once kept a file on Franz Boas is perhaps enough to pique a certain amount of interest. The added discovery that the Boas File is just one of a number of dossiers kept on the activities of anthropologists who attracted the attention of the FBI during this century suggests the existence of a body of historical data that might cast interesting (if somewhat colored) light on the development of the discipline. Under the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, it is now possible to obtain material relating to the investigative work and findings obtained by Government agencies. Although requests for information can be held up for long periods of time, and denials are not infrequent, the older files (especially those involving people who are no longer alive) seem to be more readily available, and to elicit more timely responses upon inquiry.

During the Reagan and Bush presidencies, inquiries of the FBI, the State Department, and the CIA have been delayed increasingly. On April 2, 1982, Reagan signed the Executive Order that slowed the declassification of information process by placing new restrictions on access to material. This order superseded a 1978 Executive Order by President Carter, which had ordered declassification within a certain period of time, forbade classification of data after a request for it had been made, and curtailed declassification and review practices in the National Archives, and in other agencies and departments. Further tightening of procedures continued as late as October, 1987, with changes made by President Reagan and his Attorney General (Mitgang 1987:47-48)

Domestic surveillance became professionalized by the FBI's best-known leader, J. Edgar Hoover, who served as director from 1924 until his death in 1972. He began working in the Justice Department in 1917, and within two years' time was providing Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer with material for the infamous antiradical "Palmer raids." The design and mechanisms that Hoover began with this work and later in domestic intelligence have outlasted him and generally remain intact to this day (Mitgang 1987:47)

As the following document (discovered by Ira Bashkow in the National Academy of Sciences Archives) suggests, the Bureau's interest in Boas began in 1920, in the aftermath of his criticism of "Scientists as Spies" and his censure by the American Anthropological Association--and was apparently

precipitated by his chief antagonist in that episode, as part of a general campaign against him (Palmer 1920; cf. Stocking 1968).

Office of the Attorney General
Department of Justice
Washington, D.C.

January 20, 1920

Dr. Charles D. Walcott,
Secretary, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

Your communication of December 22nd addressed to the President concerning the article appearing in the issue of "THE NATION" for Saturday December 20, 1919, page 797, signed "FRANZ BOAS" has been called to my attention.

I desire to express to you my appreciation of your courtesy in calling this matter to the attention of the President and I have the Honor to advise you that the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice has been instructed to make a thorough inquiry into the past and present activities of FRANZ BOAS, in order to ascertain whether or not he has been identified with any of the pernicious radical activities in this country.

Faithfully yours,
[A. Mitchell Palmer]
Attorney General.

How the FBI interest in Boas was manifest during the next fifteen years is unclear, since the initiation date of the file provided to me by the FBI is July 24, 1936. Numbered #100-15338, it continued to have data placed into it until December, 1942, and was officially closed on July 4, 1950--which interestingly enough was a Federal holiday. The file was placed into a declassified category in 1983.

Forty-nine pages in length, the Boas File was made available only after a great deal of information, including names and often entire pages, had been blacked out. Although there are twelve reasons for such censorship listed in response to each request for data, it usually falls under a clause in Title 5 of the United States Code, Section 552. This exemption reads, "Information which is currently and properly classified pursuant to Executive Order 12356 in the interest of the national defense or foreign policy, for example, information involving intelligence sources or methods" (Mitgang 1987: 47). Approximately one-half of the Boas File has been censored.

Data included on informant pages show what type of information the FBI felt was important to the file. One unsigned page states, "Franz Boas had agreed to operate 'under Communist discipline' but this was largely due to the influence of [BLACKED-OUT]. There was some doubt expressed as to whether Franz Boas in reality fully appreciated what the Communist philosophy stood for. He was a member of a considerable number of Communist fronts." A memorandum for the Attorney General says, "In conversation today with [BLACKED-OUT], he asked me to tell you that Boas, who is connected with Columbia University in New York City, is one of the leading 'stooges' for Communistic groups in the United States. He is eighty-odd years of age and is used by these Communistic groups to put over propoganda for them." Another page of the file sent by Special Messenger names Boas as a "menace of the FBI" and adds, "Professor Boas is not a member of the Communist Party, according to reports which I have received. He is over eighty years of age and is said to be paralyzed and seldom comes to his office."

Although these passages suggest that Boas was regarded merely as a "stooge," his name is followed by a "C" in the first pages of his file, which according to FBI coding stands for Communist (Mitgang 1987:46). One FBI agent in fact reported that "Professor Franz Boaz, also known as Professor Franz Boas, is considered to be one of 400 people, most of them prominent, who were classified as concealed Communists and were thus sectioned to Internal Security with FBI investigative categorization." Although Boas' family had spelled their name with an "s" long before he came to this country, the "z" spelling was occasionally used earlier in the century by people who did not know him--one suspects with a certain xenophobic charge. The spelling issue figures explicitly in another entry: "informant stated that Franz Boas had in recent months had his name spelled as Boas. The informant commented that it appeared strange he should change the spelling of his name in his eighty-fourth year." [!]

Inclusion with the C designation was based upon information given to the FBI by informants and by reviews of literature and letters that pertained to loyalty or political commitment (Mitgang 1987:46). FBI agents were asked to query informants regarding a suspected subversive from a schedule containing fourteen questions, which provided the basis for an analysis and conclusion regarding the subject's political status. Among the questions asked regarding Boas were the following:

1. Has the individual ever written anything that could be considered Communist literature (Did the person write for The Daily Worker, New Masses, or Political Affairs?)
2. Was the individual active in front organizations, and if so, how active, and in which organizations?

3. Was the person involved in any espionage, and if so, what type and who knew it? Did the person ever do any special work for the Party?

4. Is the individual still active or sympathetic to the Party?

This series of questions is followed by a statement that additional questions were asked as a result of answers given by informants in order to fully develop information.

The case for determining Boas' political bias was based not only upon informant testimony, but also upon his affiliation with certain organizations. Labeled as "extreme Left Wing Types," the organizations to which Boas was alleged to have belonged are listed in a letter J. Edgar Hoover sent to Brigadier General Edwin M. Watson on April 13, 1940:

Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky
Honorary President of the German-American League for Culture
Advisor on the organization of the New World Resettlement Fund for Spanish Refugees
Sponsor for the Spanish Intellectual Aid
Member of American League to Abolish Capitol Punishment
The John Reed Club
New School for Social Research
Society for Cultural Relations with Russia
National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners
World Congress Against War
American Committee for Struggle Against War
National Committee for the League Against Fascism
Committee for Victims of German Fascism
World Peaceways
Conference on Pan-American Democracy
Association for the Advancement of Atheism
Chairman, American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom
National Sponsor for the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born
National Council of the American Peace Mobilization
Executive Board member of the American Committee to Save Refugees
Member Advisory Council of the American Council for Cultural Relations with Russia
Sponsor of the German-American Emergency Conference
Sponsor of the Committee to Defend America by Keeping Out of War
Sponsor of the Schappes Defense Committee
Sponsor of the National Emergency Conference to Save Spanish Refugees
Sponsor of the First Inter-American Student Congress
Signer of the petition of the Citizens' Committee to Free Earl Browder

It is interesting to note that the FBI missed or omitted several organizational affiliations for Boas in their File. He was a member of the New York Conference for Inalienable Rights, American Peace Mobilization Common Council for American Unity, Committee for Defense of Public Education, and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties. He was active also in the East and West Foundation which was headed by Pearl Buck, and he belonged to the International Labor Defense Organization. (APS/BC)

In addition to lists of organizational affiliations and informant questionnaires, the file includes newspaper articles which were clipped and then copied. A total of seventeen pages contain copies of articles that refer either to Boas' activities and commentaries, or to his death. Although clippings were taken from The New York Times, The Plaindealer, and The New York World Telegraph, most of the articles are from The Daily Worker. Agents noted the sharp dichotomy between Boas' memberships in organizations such as the American Anthropological Association, The American Philosophical Society, and American Academy of Science, as reported in The New York Times' obituary, and the listing in the The Daily Worker's notice, which cited Boas' affiliations with the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom and the Conference for Pan American Democracy.

Boas did not ignore the FBI, and he expressed concern for their activities by writing a letter of warning to his friends and colleagues in 1939. That letter, of course, also became a part of the file:

You are undoubtedly aware of the apprehension with which intelligent people throughout the country have realized the dangerous nature and scope of the FBI's activities as recently exposed by Senator Harris and the Senate Interstate Commerce Commission. We have learned that the FBI's uncouth and violent raids in Detroit are apparently only one phase of the undemocratic procedure of the tapping of wires, spying on labor committees and establishing for the future a nation-wide index file of progressive individuals who have never been either convicted or accused of a crime.

It would appear that nothing less than a thorough investigation of these ominous activities of the FBI can prevent a repetition in 1940 or 1941 of the organized national witch hunt that horrified the country in 1919 and 1920.

Prominent Americans from various parts of the country, some of whom will represent organizations, are therefore planning to meet in Washington on Sunday, April 14th, to plan an appropriate appeal to the administration. It is

proposed to seek interviews on Monday, the 15th, with President Roosevelt, Attorney General Jackson, Senators Wheeler and Norris and other Senators and Representatives to request a thorough official investigation of the FBI.

Whatever action is finally taken will of course depend on those of us who gather in Washington. I think it is important in this connection that there be absolutely no publicity on this matter until after we hold our meeting.

Will you be able to join the delegation and to persuade other prominent Americans of your acquaintance to come with you?

I realize that the time is short, but if we are to act at all we must act immediately. April 14th and 15th are the latest possible dates for effective action. Won't you kindly indicate your response immediately in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

While in retrospect the Boas File seems quite silly in parts and is certainly full of errors and unwarranted conclusions, it is interesting to note how Boas' duality of roles is perceived throughout the file. The obituary in The New York Times stated, "His retirement from academic duties six years ago seemed only to free him for increased activity in the political field on behalf of intellectual freedom and democratic equality, in opposition to the dictatorships of Europe." The Daily Worker added, "Never a scholar of the ivory tower school, Dr. Boas began to manifest an active interest in world affairs with the advent of Hitlerism, and later with the attack upon Republican Spain by the fascist power. These events caused him, he later said, to reconsider his whole world philosophy."

Boas' own words perhaps offer the best possible answer to conclusions made about him in this File. Charges of feebleness, mental confusion, and hibernation are easily put aside merely by examining the work and correspondence that he was able to complete during the years 1940 to 1942. He wrote over 1500 letters during this time, and three-fourths of them pertained to political and social issues. In none of them does he appear to be confused or out of touch with the issues. Letters he wrote to people like Einstein, John Peters at Yale and Harlow Shapley at Harvard are evidence of this type of correspondence (APS/BS). Boas' correspondence also revealed how he thought of his role as activist. In a letter to the Union Theological Seminary President Henry Coffin, he said, "The only thing in which I am interested is complete intellectual freedom and I am trying to defend the rights to a free expression of opinion." (APS/BC 31 March 1941). In a letter to Sam Dyer, he stated, "In regard to

your remark that I am entirely within my rights to be a member of the Communist Party, I beg to say that I am not a member of any party, and reserve my vote according to my judgment of the issues presented at any given time, and that I am attacking any kind of curtailment of intellectual freedom, fro whatever side it may come." (APS/BC 4 December 1941) Finally, to the Tass Agency, Boas sent a Christmas telegram in 1941, and it reads:

In the present struggle against Hitlerism our sympathies are entirely with the Soviets who bear the heaviest burden of the War against the present German Government whose aims threaten the very foundations of our civilization. We admire your courage in the defense not only of your country but also in the war against medieval ideology. Your conception of the equality of men regardless of race is a step forward in the history of mankind that we may well emulate. May the time come when the ideals of equality of opportunity and of the fullest freedom of thought and expression become the foundation of all modern society. (APS/BC 15 December 1941)

Boas felt secure in taking different roles in his later years, and the demand for his ideas and opinions was very real, especially with East Coast media sources. By speaking out about his beliefs it may be said that he "revived the idea that a scientist owed more to society than mere pursuit of knowledge and its economic application" (Beardsley 1973:8) The charge that "the pure scientist has to be a moral eunuch or a civic hermit" (Kuznick 1988:19) could not be levied against Boas, but because of the roles he assumed he became a target for FBI investigation. By doing so, he joined the ranks of people like Hemingway, Faulkner, Capote, Tennessee Williams, Pearl Buck, and anthropologists such as Margaret Mead¹ (Mitgang 1987: 47) Thus, another aspect of Franz Boas' life has become a matter of record and possible interest to historians who can look now at the fear and panic of his time and rationally decide how or if it relates to anthropology.

Note

1. The FBI File on Margaret Mead differs greatly from the Boas File. Over 500 pages long, this File attends to Mead's personality and qualifications for Government employment. Her file will be examined in a forthcoming article.

[2. Inspired by this piece, the editor wrote some months ago to the FBI requesting his own file; but although the request was acknowledged, the file has not yet appeared--G.W.S.]

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Robert Bieder (2010 Grovesnor Pl. Bloomington, IN 47401) and Hilke Thode-Arora are collaborating on a book on Adrian Jacobsen, who collected both people and artifacts for the Hagenbeck zoo and for the Berlin Gesellschaft für Anthropologie in the late nineteenth century.

Richard Brown (Reader in History, School of African and Asian Studies University of Sussex) has won a 1989 Research Grant from the Rockefeller Archive Center for a study of the International African Institute and the development of social anthropology.

Gloria Flaherty (German Dept., University of Illinois, Chicago) is completing a book on shamanism in the Enlightenment, having worked back from an interest in performance, through major intellectual figures (Goethe, Herder, Diderot) to the ethnographic sources in which shamanism was first described.

Marc Manganaro (English Department, Rutgers) looks forward to his anthology Modernist Anthropology: From Field-Work to Text coming out in 1990. He is also working on a book concerning the rhetoric of authority behind the comparativism of Frazier, Eliot, Frye and Joseph Campbell. It is an examination of pre-ethnographic materials, the comparativism