

Applied anthropology, anyone?

Guest editorial by Jonathan Marks

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Fig. 1. Dr. Franz Boas, new President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is shown here, at the left, exchanging compliments with the retiring President, Dr. T. H. Morgan, 1931. (Morgan won the Nobel Prize two years later for his work in genetics; he and Boas worked in the same building at Columbia for over two decades).

The scientific identity of anthropology is, of course, an old discussion, as is the relationship of 'biological' anthropology to the rest of the discipline. Ralph Linton (1938) believed that '[t]he study of man's origins and varieties is a branch of the natural sciences', and that this has problematic consequences for the relationship of that study to cultural anthropology. 'The connection is already so tenuous that a complete break between the two seems well within the bounds of possibility. The phenomena with which the two disciplines deal are of different orders and the question is whether there is any real link between these orders.' (1938: 242-243)

The scientific status of anthropology became part of the collateral damage of the 'science wars' of the 1990s, partly fuelled by Derek Freeman's 1983 critique of Margaret Mead (1928). In hindsight, perhaps the most extraordinary feature of Freeman's work is the premise that *Coming of age in Samoa* was a theoretical linchpin of modern anthropology, such that undermining its narrative would somehow necessitate a new, naturalized, sociobiological anthropology (Shankman 2009). Actually, even on its worst day, Mead's bestselling vision of Samoan society stands up at least as well as Jane Goodall's (1971) bestselling vision of chimpanzee society. Yet field primatology has not had its scientific status seriously questioned, despite some thoughtful cultural and epistemological examinations (Haraway 1989; Power 1991; Rees 2009; Strum & Fedigan 2003).

The scientific identity of anthropology came into the public eye in mid December 2010, when the *New York Times* published two stories on a new controversy.¹ A committee of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) had rewritten its 'Long-Range Plan' to articulate a formal extension of the boundaries of anthropology beyond simply science.² Rather than say that anthropology is unproblematically a science, the committee chose instead to specify the domains of knowledge production incorporated by anthropology, which 'includes, but is not limited to, archaeological, biological, social, cultural, economic, political, historical, medical, visual, and linguistic anthropological research'. Frankly that sounds reasonable enough to me, as someone whose anthropological doctoral thesis was on the chromosomes of apes. To judge from the *New York Times*, however, this alteration reflected a late surge from the anti-science postmodernists and political activists.³

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But the recent media interest around the scienciness of anthropology never had it quite right. It's not that there are significant anti-science forces within anthropology. It's that anthropology, throughout its professional existence, has been engaged in a two-front science war. One front is against the creationists – an unmarked category prior to the middle of the 19th century – who have resisted historicizing the roots of the human species. Seeing our origins as residing in miracle rather than in naturalistic process, creationists have roots in American evangelical Protestantism, and they led three legal battles against human evolution in the 20th century: (1) to criminalize the teaching of human evolution, in the 1920s; (2) to mandate the teaching of creationism as a scientific alternative to human evolution, in the 1970s; and (3) to challenge the authority of science in modern knowledge production, by introducing supernatural cause ('intelligent design') into the canon, in the 1990s.



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Obviously, this issue is very important to lots of people. Nevertheless, in spite of the cultural significance of creationism in the modern world, now extending well beyond its origins among American evangelicals, there is only a single ethnographic study of creationists (Toumey 1994), and that predates 'intelligent design'. There is plenty of questionnaire data, to be sure, and historical research as well, useful to those engaged in this scientific/political/religious issue (Coleman & Carlin 2004; Robbins & Cohen 2009; Witham 2005). But there is precious little of the sort of particularly valuable knowledge that anthropology produces.

Without adequate information on why these people reject this science, biological anthropologists – who are often in the position of having to teach human evolution to them – are more or less obliged to assume that they are simply stupid, and are behaving inexplicably and irrationally. Obviously creationists do not live in caves – they believe in science and technology the same as 'we' do; but we do not know why they single out this aspect of science for rejection (as opposed to, say, historical linguistics, which challenged the biblical account of the Tower of Babel two generations before *The origin of species*, but without an outcry). We do not know how they think individually about different aspects of evolution – about the earth being very old, about the cause of the taxonomic hierarchy, about being genealogically related to monkeys, or about the meaning of fossils – or whether the voices we hear most loudly do indeed speak unproblematically for the diverse publics they presume to represent. We do not know what it might take to get them to reclassify human evolution as science that they don't really know about, but might support (like the space programme), or that they don't really know about, but are happy to ignore (like superstring theory). We don't even know how valid and useful the label 'creationist' is, or the extent to which it may artificially unify Euro-Americans who think life has meaning with those who think the universe is 6,000 years old. And we certainly don't know what it means cross-culturally – that is to say, whether Islamic creationism is so unrelated to Protestant creationism that, aside from cribbing some of their anti-Darwinian literature, it is essentially a separate issue.

That is the science/antiscience axis for anthropology. The other front in anthropology's science war, however, is what

1. Wade, N. 2010a. Anthropology a science? Statement deepens a rift. *New York Times*, 10 December; Wade 2010b. Anthropology group tries to soothe tempers after dropping the word 'science'. *New York Times*, 14 December.

2. AAA 2010. AAA long-range plan. Adopted 20 November 2010. http://www.aaanet.org/about/Governance/Long_range_plan.cfm, accessed 11 May 2011.

3. Another question thrown up by the revised plan was whether the primary purpose of the AAA is to promote scholarly research or to 'advance public understanding'. This was not the issue picked up by the *New York Times*, however.

4. Medical anthropology remembers him more kindly.

5. See Holmes (1939), for example. Boas served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1931; the only other anthropologist to hold that post in the 20th century was Margaret Mead, in 1975. Kroeber was a scholar and scientist of matchless credentials, but he famously told his graduate student in 1916 that if anyone intended to use science as a justification for defiling the corpse of Ishi, '... say for me that science can go to hell. We propose to stand by our friends.' Science nevertheless prevailed (Starn 2004).

garnered the recent attention. If the first front is against the anti-scientists, the second front is against the hyper-scientists – those who reject one of the central discoveries of anthropology with equal fervour as the creationists, but who do so in the name of science. What discovery is this? That human social forms are primarily the products of history, rather than biology.

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As early as 1868, the German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel envisioned ‘a full and fruitful reform of *Anthropology*. From this new theory of man there will be developed a new *philosophy*, not like most of the airy systems of metaphysical speculation hitherto prevalent, but one founded upon the solid ground of Comparative Zoology’ (1876: vol 2: 367). In principle, this would have incorporated Haeckel’s view that there exist 12 species of living humans, lying at varying distances from the apes, and thus existing in various stages of humanity. In practice, it conflicted with the earliest anthropology being established by Haeckel’s contemporaries Rudolf Virchow and Adolf Bastian, which was rooted in ‘the psychic unity of mankind’. To this day, Virchow is remembered in biological anthropology solely for his rejection of human evolution, and not for his instrumental roles in public health or anthropometry (Marks 2010).⁴

When evolution was literally on trial in Tennessee in 1925, Clarence Darrow, the defence lawyer for the high-school teacher accused of breaking the state’s law against teaching evolution in public schools, privately studied the biology textbook out of which John T. Scopes was accused of teaching, and found that it contained white-supremacist and eugenicist views. Shortly after the trial ended, Darrow (1925, 1926) began denouncing the very biologists to whom he had so recently endeared himself, for their beliefs in racial inferiority and involuntary sterilization of the poor, and the ostensibly scientific epistemology that justified these positions. In so doing, he was following a path that had already been charted by American anthropologists Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber (Boas 1916; Kroeber 1916), who were sometimes considered to be ‘anti-science’ for their views on race and eugenics.⁵ Some decades later, a vocal group of right-wing scientists demanded (and got) a rewrite of the 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race incorporating more genetics, although the first Statement on Race had indeed been vetted by geneticists and biologists. It seemed the First Statement was deemed too radically anthropological and not sciencey enough (Brattain 2007).

This was no frivolous academic turf war. Today, there are several overlapping academic enclaves – most vociferously evolutionary psychology – attempting to wield the authority of science against anthropology, and in particular against understanding social forms as the products of human history. In this sense they lie in the broad intellectual lineage incorporating Haeckel and the eugenicists, trying to transform the products of cultural histories into those of imaginary genetic natures, and claiming the voice of science in doing so, usually in explicit opposition to normative anthropology.

Indeed the rhetoric of the hyper-scientists is directly symmetrical to that of the creationists (Gray & Wolfe 1982). One need hardly look in obscure places to find the thought (once confined to the segregationist literature of the early 1960s) that anthropology is somehow misguided, perhaps even deliberately so, in its steadfast resistance to naturalizing human social facts. It is there in fairly recent award-winning science books: Jared Diamond’s *The rise and fall of the third chimpanzee* (*The third chimpanzee* in the US); Wrangham and Peterson’s *Demonic males*; Steven Pinker’s *The blank slate*; Nicholas Wade’s *Before the dawn*.

The last title of the four in particular is a highly geneticized account of human evolution and diversity, which was characterized by anthropological geneticists writing in the world’s leading science journal as being ‘in step with a long march of social Darwinists’ (Weiss & Buchanan 2006). Its author was subsequently quoted in *Anthropology News* (published by the American Anthropological Association) as declaring that: ‘Anyone who’s interested in cultural anthropology should escape as quickly as they can from their cultural anthropology department and go and learn some genetics, which will be the foundation of cultural anthropology in the future’ (Dvoskin 2007). Wade went on to write the two *New York Times* articles that brought the supposed ‘anti-science’ attitude in American anthropology into the public eye.

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We anthropologists are – and have always been – in a two-front cultural war, and there are political, ideological and scientific dimensions to each front. Most of us, however, perceive ourselves as only participating in one. If we are biological anthropologists, we line up against the creationists, and we may secretly wonder which side our social/cultural colleagues are aligning themselves with. If we are social/cultural anthropologists, we line up against the genetic essentialists, and we may secretly wonder which side our biological colleagues are aligning themselves with.

There is merit, however, in recognizing that anthropology, as a cohesive discipline, can engage both long-term cultural wars simultaneously by establishing trans-anthropological alliances. If creationism is ideology, then shouldn’t an engagement with it be aided by some authority in the anthropology of religion, and some knowledge of just how ideological clashes tend to play themselves out? And if the geneticization of human social forms really is an exploitation of scientific authority to legitimize political inequality, then shouldn’t an engagement with it be aided by some authority in the empirical study of human differences?

However parochial our own research programmes may be, this is a moment in which the intellectual breadth of anthropology can benefit both ends of the field, whose legitimacy is simultaneously under assault from different cultural forces with convergent goals. ●

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