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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Why We Should Care About the Radical Origins of Anthropology

Review by Luke Glowacki

Charles King. 2019. *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century*. Doubleday.

At a time when our nation is confronting some of the most significant social challenges of the century, is there any room for a new biographic carousel revolving around Franz Boas and his cadre of students and colleagues? Surprisingly, the answer is a resounding yes.

King's book achieves a rare feat, employing history to grapple with today's social ills and showing its readers where we might go if only we are armed with the boldness of these anthropological 'renegades' in confronting racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and bigotry in all its forms.

Much of King's work surveys familiar history and a cast of well-known anthropological players including Boas, Mead, Fortune, Sapir, and Benedict. He also includes others less recognized for their anthropological work: Zora Neale Hurston (arguably more famous than the others but far better known as a novelist than as a pioneering anthropologist), Ella Cara Deloria, and even Robert Seido Hashima who so crucially informed Benedict's work on Japanese culture. But rather than a linear narrative tracing intellectual descent from Boas as so many biographies do, *Gods of the Upper Air* features sparkling prose and vivid personalities often speaking in their own words to illustrate how the relationships between these characters reacting against the social context fed into the most radical revolution in recent western thinking: Race is not real. Gender roles are socially constructed. No society or group of people is better or worse than another. It was a reckoning with the nature of reality as foundational as the ideas coming out of the Vienna Circle but one with much more lasting social import

The relationships between these founders of cultural anthropology gave rise to a set of ideas that refuted the prevailing orthodoxy, which King shows was a bedrock of American thought at the time and would later find close parallels in Nazi ideology and Japanese imperialism. The core ideas they were responding to were increasingly racist and xenophobic beliefs that reified a hierarchy of supposed biologically real categories that were working their way into public policy, informing geographic restrictions on immigration, the promotion of eugenics, and the expansion of Jim Crow laws. The effects of these bigoted beliefs gained devastating international traction:

King notes that Hitler was influenced by Madison Grant's pseudo-scientific theories of race that Boas spent decades attempting to demolish.

It's here where the story really picks up, with King throwing us smack dab into the streets of New York a century ago to watch Boas himself conducting careful studies among the peoples of New York so that data, not ill-informed belief, could refute Madison Grant and the racist ideas of the day. Those data, the collection of which were ironically commissioned by the US government even as it was increasingly becoming an intolerant white supremacy, showed that there are no meaningful differences between groups of persons based on ancestral heritage and that the variation within a population is greater than the variation between populations. It was the first scientific demolition of the concept of race.

These are now standard anthropological fare, but at the time, King shows that they were radical ideas: instead of using what seemed to be obvious differences to justify an existing hierarchy (or, as King would put it, using theory to find observations that support it), Boas and his circle made the radical observation that the best way to understand the world was to carefully look at it. Once they did, what seemed to be real differences and a natural order turned out to be superficial differences and a reflection of our own cultural myopia. Better to (as King would put it) let the careful accumulation of information about the world, shape how we think about the world. And for today, that's a lesson we would still do well to bear in mind. A wealth of data from across the social sciences and humanities show that group differences are more the result of historical contingencies than anything else. This finding was a triumph for scientific and humanistic thinking. With a century of internalization, these ideas now seem obvious, but at the time, their success was by no means assured.

King also challenges some of the orthodoxy today that many students of contemporary anthropology (including the author of this review) may have adopted. For instance, he tackles the belief that anthropology in the first half of the 20th century was entirely outward looking by reminding us of the many formative works of the era, including Margaret Mead's 1942 analysis of American society and Boas' exhortation to study all societies, including our own. And he shows that just as cultures are not static, the beliefs of these pioneers were not either. They evolved over the course of a lifetime, in including from a view of cultures stuck in time and vanishing to one in which they change and transform. King aptly shows how some of these changes were driven by members of the 'renegade' circle, especially Zora Neale Hurston, who did perhaps more than any of the others to turn the anthropological lens inward and show that cultures today are just as worth study as cultures of the past.

Where King's otherwise illuminating work falls short is around the periphery of this radical scholarship. If Boas, Benedict and the others really believed in challenging prevailing beliefs about race and social ranking, then why were they relatively silent about Jim Crow but not about the ranking or treatment of European groups? How would they later confront critics of their approach, including those who say they perpetuated the very stereotypes they sought to demolish? But in fairness, King's book is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of the foundations of cultural anthropology but rather to show how the synergy resulting from the collision of these unique personalities changed the way we think about the world.

Whatever their foibles as humans, Boas and his circle were reacting against a system that sought to entrench race as biologically real and a foundation for social policy. As such, despite their emphasis on cultures as static, their lack of realization that many of these cultures were not dying but transforming, and their failure to recognize that the peoples whose culture they were studying cared about the dissemination of their cultural practices, it is clear that we still owe a great debt to these revolutionaries for challenging a system that sought to build social policy on a false belief of races as real and ranked, pathologize non-Victorian heteronormative gender roles, and viewed non-American and European cultures as decidedly less than equal.

Given the pervasive and damaging stereotypes about race and gender that continue today, one cannot help but feel gratitude for the deep theorizing and empirical work that has already been done to make it easier for us to confront these harmful and false narratives. The very fact that we as anthropologists take as a given that it's our role to confront these legacies and search for commonalities is evidence of the success of anthropological legacy of Boas, Mead, Benedict, Hurston, and Delora. We do so through the theoretical and empirical foundation that was laid a century ago, a perspective that showed the full and equal value of all human groups.

Our field might be unique for this orientation, but this development was by no means obvious. King's book makes us realize that this leap, from the belief that cultures and peoples existed within a hierarchy to the realization that no culture or peoples are better or worse than another, was a leap that we may not have made without the happenstance of this bold mix of thinkers. Anthropology's primary aim—to understand human differences in order to reveal the commonality between all humans—is the best defense against stereotypes based on race, gender, class and national origin.

At a moment when we are reckoning with anthropology's roots and contributions to systemic social ills, King's accomplishment reminds us that as a field, anthropology still has a central place in setting the record straight about the nature of social categories.

Luke Glowacki
Department of Anthropology
Pennsylvania State University



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