

Franz boaz –  
anthropologist and  
civil rights leader



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Franz Boas, ( 1858 - 1942 ) is a well-known, widely respected anthropologist and teacher often referred to as the Founder of American Anthropology. But there were other contributions by Boas, possibly not as well known, but in my opinion, equally important and deserving of recognition. Boas did not limit his outspoken opinions to just anthropology, he was equally outspoken regarding his opinions on human rights and equality, individual liberty and equal opportunity. And he did so in an era of evolutionism, slavery was still accepted by many and racism was a way of life.

I'm sure a great many people are familiar with this aspect of Franz Boas. I believe, however, that there is an equally large number of individuals that aren't. I hope, with this paper, to educate some of these individuals. As a child, Boas was raised to value the importance of learning and of knowledge, personal freedom, and the right for equal opportunity among all human beings (Glick, 1982; Liss 1997 ). He based his political views on these core values and actively took part in any political activity he believed in. For example, Boas despised Nazism and would combat them and everything they stood for very early on.

Boas helped hundreds of Europeans that sought escape and needed asylum. He organized meetings, wrote letters, working tirelessly to help as many of the displaced individuals that he could.. Since Nazism was also occurring during the Great Depression in the United States, Boas also spoke frequently, giving speeches and writing in periodicals about economical inequality . Boas was also extremely active in the human rights movement. He fervently believed in the absolute value of equal rights for all individuals and

peoples and hated class-ifying them and lumping people into categories ( Bunzel; 1962: 9).

Boas seems to have been concerned about Indian rights and their unfair treatment for most of his life but felt powerless to help. (" The Indians are really suffering and always have, but I can do nothing about it (to Ernst, 11/18/30; Boas quoted in Rohner 1969: 291). Boas also advocated intermarriage between black and white, something not many people would dare have done. He even was invited to deliver the commencement address at Atlanta University, an all black college. But Boas recognized the " race problem" involved more than blacks and Indians.

Prejudice could be directed at any culture and new immigrants were arriving by the thousands. Once again, Boas was an activist on their behalf, giving speeches and talking with the press (Klineburg; 1935). There are many more issues Franz Boas was actively involved in concerning civil rights and what he perceived as inequality but I listed only a few. I hope, however, the examples I gave showed that Franz Boas was more than anthropologist and teacher, he was a strong political and civil rights activist in issues he believed in.