

# The Cult of Franz Boas and his “Conspiracy” to Destroy the White Race<sup>1</sup>

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*Americans Who Have  
Damaged White Interests*

1. Lyndon Johnson
2. Franklin Roosevelt
3. William Clinton
4. Abraham Lincoln
5. Theodore [Edward] Kennedy
6. Earl Warren
7. Martin Luther King
8. John Kennedy
9. Jesse Jackson
10. Richard Nixon
11. James Carter
12. Franz Boas
13. Dwight Eisenhower
14. Eleanor Roosevelt
15. Harry Truman
16. Woodrow Wilson

*Americans Who Have  
Advanced White Interests*

1. Jared Taylor
2. Patrick Buchanan
3. David Duke
4. Thomas Jefferson
5. Samuel Francis
6. Robert E. Lee
7. George Washington
8. Wilmont Robertson
9. Nathan B. Forest
10. Arthur Jensen
11. William Pierce
12. Teddy Roosevelt
13. Charles Lindbergh
14. Charles Murray
15. George L. Rockwell
16. William Shockley

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THESE RANK-ORDERED LISTS of Americans who have advanced or damaged white interests appeared in *American Renaissance*, a magazine that bills itself as the leading journal of race-realist thinking (Taylor 1997:9). Reasonably well argued, and

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<sup>1</sup>Read 25 April 2008, as part of the symposium “Cultural Subjects and Objects: The Legacy of Franz Boas and Its Futures in Anthropology, Academe, and Human Rights.” Much of this essay will appear as a chapter in the author’s *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Duke University Press).

free of the glaring racial epithets and jarring anti-Semitism that pepper much of the white pride literature, *American Renaissance* is a favorite among the tweed-jacket and sherry set of the white pride movement. The magazine's editor, Jared Taylor, published this list along with others in an article that reported the findings of an extensive survey he conducted about the views, beliefs, and interests of his readership.

After presidents, recent presidential candidates, Supreme Court justices, first ladies, and Civil War heroes are crossed off, the list becomes interesting as it relates to the history of anthropology. On the side that documents those who have damaged white interests, there are two names left—Franz Boas and Martin Luther King Jr. The people left on the other side include an interesting mix of scientists, pundits, and organizers of white supremacist organizations; and, of course, one of the most celebrated heroes of the white pride movement, the American aviator turned Nazi sympathizer, Charles Lindbergh. The survey was wide-ranging. Taylor dutifully enumerated the number of children, handguns, and years of education of each of his readers. At first glance this survey seems to be of little significance, save for the sentiments of the 391 loyal respondents who deemed the magazine's editor the most important "American who has advanced white interests" (Taylor 1997:9).

One must ask, however, why was Franz Boas even considered alongside such historic figures as Martin Luther King Jr., Earl Warren, and Lyndon B. Johnson—people easily identifiable with the civil rights movement? In short, within the quite diverse communities that advocate such things as white pride, Holocaust denial, white supremacy, immigration restriction, and a cornucopia of racisms, Franz Boas is singled out as the one scholar that white supremacists and anti-Semites love to hate.

Deemed the "Godfather of the Multi-Cult Nightmare," and the fabricator of the "equalitarian dogma," Franz Boas is often portrayed within these circles as the man who somehow singlehandedly perpetuated the myth that all races have an equal potential for achieving intelligence and developing civilizations, as well as the idea that cultures cannot be evaluated against the standard of Western civilization. During the late 1940s through the mid-1960s, scholars, politicians, and pundits who were fearful of desegregation and threatened by the specter of racial amalgamation, more or less, invented or reinvented a Franz Boas who was the evil Jew who attracted a cult following responsible for spreading vicious propaganda about racial equality and cultural relativism. As one pundit opined, the idea that there are no pure races was a "hoax contrived by Franz Boas, a twisted little Jew, who popped into the United States, [and] was, for undisclosed reasons, made Professor of Anthropology in Columbia University, and founded a school of fiction-writing called 'social anthropology'" (Oliver 2003:24–25).

That Boas was a Jewish immigrant and was often viewed as the scientist responsible for toppling racial determinism and promoting cultural relativism, somehow continues to push all the right buttons of members of these types of communities. In addition, many of Boas's students (only some of whom were Jewish) were influential in reshaping academic anthropology in the United States in a way that forever changed the social sciences (Frank 1997:731). And it *was* this new social science that Chief Justice Earl Warren cited as his justification for hobbling Jim Crow segregation when he wrote his opinion for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Taken together, all of the elements of an old-fashioned Jewish conspiracy converge.

The so-called Boas conspiracy, however, has been circulating around anti-Semitic and white-supremacist networks in one form or another for some sixty years (Winston 2001:2). Franz Boas's influence over American anthropology, his public efforts to challenge ideas about racial purity, his assertion that whites are not necessarily biologically or culturally superior, and his belief that amalgamation might actually solve the problems created by racism, all came together in the minds of some to metastasize into one more conspiracy theory for the paranoid, anxiety-ridden perpetrators of the unfortunately all-too-popular myth that Jews control the banks, the media, the legal system, et cetera.

By the late 1950s, anthropology became an unreliable narrator in the story of white supremacy, and Boas was to blame; he subsequently emerged as the likely lightning rod to spark one more version of this incendiary myth: Jews now controlled science! The staying power and wide circulation of this well-traveled lore, I believe, explain why Boas catapults to the top of the list of people who have damaged "white interests." Ferreting out the provenance and mapping the circulation of this narrative is complicated and difficult, although most intellectual historians correctly point to Carleton Putnam's *Race and Reason: A Yankee View* (1961) as the catalyst that spawned the most virulent, conspiratorial, and indeed folkloric renditions of the Boas conspiracy (Winston 2001; Tucker 1994:159; Jackson 2001:255).

Investigating the history of this conspiracy is difficult because it lies in the shadows between myth and science, history and folklore. I am not a folklorist, but I believe it is important for anthropologists and historians of science to be aware of how people read, use, and appropriate anthropology and other behavioral sciences to extend particular projects and ideological agendas.

Public intellectuals are usually academics who go beyond the academy to influence public policy, public opinion, or popular science and culture. The notions of "a public" and "influence" are not stable in the fast-paced and populist world of the Internet. Beyond questioning what

constitutes a public, I want to raise several open-ended questions. Can academics become public intellectuals as a result of vociferous detractors? What can we learn about the impact of Boas's scholarship by exploring the public discourse that continues to deride it?

“ALL THIS EQUALITY GARBAGE WAS STARTED  
BY A JEW ANTHROPOLOGIST NAMED FRANZ BOAS”

Perhaps the high-water mark of this conspiracy theory was articulated by George Lincoln Rockwell when a young Alex Haley published his interview with the “self-appointed führer of the American Nazi Party and self-styled messiah of white supremacy and intransigent anti-Sem[ite]” in the April 1966 issue of *Playboy* magazine (Haley 1966: 71). A charismatic publicity-seeking extremist, Rockwell was a frequent speaker on college campuses who galvanized some support for his unimaginative, yet invective, white power movement among young men disaffected by the war in Vietnam, urban riots, the civil rights movement, and white flight to the suburbs they could not afford (Schmaltz 1999:271).

In 1966, Rockwell and his American Nazi Party (ANP) were a “motley and minuscule” crew that began opening up regional headquarters and working closely with the Ku Klux Klan (Haley 1966:72). Rockwell and members of his party successfully disrupted the nonviolent demonstrations of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, followed and antagonized the Freedom Riders in their own “hate bus,” physically assaulted Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham, Alabama, publicly ridiculed the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party, and staged a counter-demonstration at the historic 1963 march on Washington, where King delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech (Schmaltz 1999:167–237). Although *Playboy* editors knew that publishing the interview might generate even more support for Rockwell's American Nazi Party, they justified it by aiming to paint a “revealing portrait of both rampant racism and the pathology of fascism” (Haley 1966:72).

Haley, author of the blockbuster *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), conducted four interviews with Rockwell over the course of the entire calendar year of 1965. During that same year, Haley was completing his co-authored *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), which was inspired by the *Playboy* interview he conducted with Malcolm X in 1963. In the introduction to the interview with Rockwell, Haley describes the setting of his initial meeting:

About a dozen Nazis stared icily as the guards walked me past them up the stairs to Rockwell's door, where a side-armed storm trooper frisked me. . . . Finding me “clean,” the guard ceremoniously opened

the door, stepped inside, saluted, said, "*Sieg heil*"—echoed brusquely from within—then stood aside and nodded permission for me to come ahead. I did. As if for dramatic effect, Rockwell was standing across the room, corncob pipe in hand, beneath a portrait of Adolf Hitler. Warned about my Negritude, he registered no surprise. . . . [Then] he took out a pearl-handled revolver, placed it pointedly on the arm of his chair, sat back and spoke for the first time: "I'm ready if you are."

Alex Haley's skills as an informed journalist and a seasoned interviewer erected a stage for Rockwell to give a command performance. True to the editors' goals, *Playboy* readers got a bird's-eye view of both rampant racism and the pathology of fascism. Rockwell began by asserting that "I don't mix with your kind, and we call your race 'niggers.'" Demonstrating wry cynicism and an ability to remain unflappable, Haley cleverly responded, "I've been called 'nigger' many times, Commander, but this is the first time I'm being *paid* for it. So you go right ahead. What have you got against 'niggers?'" (Haley 1966:74). Haley's gambit was perfect; Rockwell went off, spewing the invective rhetoric that earned him the nickname "the Barnum of the bigots." Rockwell explained that civil rights really "boils down" to "race mixing," and evoked Senator Theodore Bilbo's back to Africa scheme by suggesting that he was "speaking for the majority of whites" who believe "that we should take the billions of dollars now being wasted on foreign aid to Communist countries which hate us and give that money to our own niggers to build their own civilized nation in Africa" (Haley 1966:74).

Waxing nostalgic, Rockwell deployed a familiar trope that Theodore Roosevelt liked to use when he lamented the loss of "barbarian virtues" among the most civilized whites (Jacobson 2001:4). "The white man is getting too soft," Rockwell bellowed, explaining how desk work, electric lawn mowers, and fur-lined toilet seats have made the white man "soft and squishy." White women, Rockwell asserted, were also to blame for the perversion of white youth. "Some of our white women," Rockwell continued, "especially in the crazy leftist environment on our college campuses, get carried away by Jewish propaganda into betraying their own instincts by choosing a healthy black buck. . . . I have to admit that a healthy nigger garbage man is certainly superior physically and sexually to a pasty-faced skinny white peace creep" (Haley 1966:74).

Haley used this opening to escort Rockwell into a discussion of other areas in which Negroes might be superior to whites, but Rockwell balked. Rockwell asserted that the average hard-working white American male is basically the most superior being in the world. He then discussed the great civilizations that whites have built, while Haley

countered with the great civilizations that Africans had built, but Rockwell quickly turned his argument about the superiority of white blood into a discussion of evolution and the pathological impact of “mongrelization.” Haley pointed out that “the words superior and inferior have no meaning to geneticists . . . neither does mongrelization. Every authority in the field has attested that the world’s racial groups are genetically indistinguishable from one another. All men . . . are created equal.” At this point in the interview, Rockwell’s adversarial tone came to a palpable halt.

Dripping with sarcasm with a hint of paternalism, Rockwell evoked the Boas conspiracy as though he were going to present exculpatory evidence that would cinch his case that all men are not created equal:

“You’re bringing tears to my eyes. Don’t you know that all this equality garbage was started by a Jew anthropologist named Franz Boas from Columbia University? Boas was followed by another Jew from Columbia named Gene Weltfish. And our present Jew expert preaching equality is another Jew named Ashley Montagu. Any anthropologist who dares to preach the facts known by any farmer in the barnyard—that breeds differ in quality—is simply not allowed to survive in the university or in publishing, because he can’t earn a living. You never hear from that side. But Carleton Putnam has written a wonderful book called *Race and Reason*, showing that there is plenty of scholarly evidence to back up my contention that the nigger race is inherently inferior to the white race intellectually.” (Haley 1966:76)

After Haley challenged several of his assertions, Rockwell retorted, “I don’t feel like quibbling. What I am saying is that I believe the Jews have consciously *perverted* the study of anthropology and biology and human genetics in order to reach this phony conclusion—and thus destroy the great white race” (Haley 1966:76). Rockwell then explicitly linked the work of Boas, Weltfish, and Montagu to a larger Jewish conspiracy to destroy the white race. Haley asked, “You said the Jews are behind this plot. Since they are whites themselves, how would they benefit from their own destruction?” “They won’t be mingling like the rest of us,” Rockwell responded, “they believe they’re the chosen people—chosen to rule the world. But the only world they could rule would be a world of inferior beings. And as long as the white man is pure, they cannot succeed. But when the white man permits himself to be mixed with black men, then the Jews can master him” (Haley 1966:76). Rockwell went on and on, describing even more far-fetched plots—a cabal of so-called Jewish conspirators instigated the riots in Watts, Rochester, and Harlem. He also provided disquieting descriptions of Jewish control over “Martin Luther Coon,” the Communist Party, and the media, and sarcastically quipped that the real God for the Jew is money. To

complete his jeremiad, Rockwell put forth a long-winded but unconvincing denial that “there is any valid proof that innocent Jews were systematically murdered by the Nazis” (Haley 1966:78).

Shortly after the *Playboy* interview was published, Rockwell fine-tuned the propaganda machine of his party and launched the *National Socialist World*, to appeal to a supposedly more sophisticated audience than the readers of his other two publications, the *Rockwell Report* and *Stormtrooper*. Rockwell envisioned targeting the full class spectrum, as he noted: “We have designed some great products to appeal to specific customers: the ‘hawg-jowl’ *Stormtrooper*, the ‘Delmonico steak’ *Rockwell Report*—and now the ‘Cherries Jubilee’ which you hold in your hand, the *National Socialist World*” (Rockwell 1966:12). For the inaugural issue, Rockwell outlined this all-inclusive strategy of spreading propaganda in an aptly titled article, “From Ivory Tower to Privy Wall: The Art of Propaganda.” Here again, he hammered on the so-called Boas conspiracy, this time citing Carleton Putnam’s *Race and Reason* (1961) explicitly in footnote 3, which was noted at the end of this passage.

The whole of Jewry pitched in to boost their boy. Boas was praised in every Jewish-owned newspaper and periodical and given every academic prize they could promote. Little by little, Boas gained such “stature” by this Jewish mutual-admiration society technique that he became an “acknowledged authority” in social anthropology and ethnology. His students and colleagues at Columbia—Herskovits, Klineberg, Ashley Montagu, Weltfish—as unsavory a collection of left-wing Jews as one might hope for—spread his doctrines far and wide, deliberately poisoning the minds of two generations of American students at many of our largest universities (Rockwell 1966:10).

This journal was not sustained, nor did it receive wide circulation; today, collectors fetch more than \$200 for an original copy. This so-called Boas conspiracy could have run its course as the wistful musings of a cantankerous separatist and died along with Rockwell when he was gunned down in the summer of 1967 by one of his lieutenants at a laundromat in Virginia (Schmaltz 1999:323). Rockwell, and subsequently his writings, however, sustain an avid following among white supremacist and anti-Semitic groups today. He is lionized as a result of his, for lack of a better word, ecumenical approach toward racism and anti-Semitism. Considered to be the so-called father of the white power movement, Rockwell believed that to contribute, one need only be white and not Jewish (Ridgeway 1990:85). He thus eliminated the criterion that members must be Protestant Nordic or Aryan.

This one article, “The Art of Propaganda,” is reproduced on the Web sites of the American Nazi Party, the National Socialist Movement, the First Amendment Exercise Machine, and Don Black’s infamous Storm-

front, also known as the “White Nationalist Resource Page,” which advocates “White Pride—World Wide” and boasts seven thousand hits a day. Moreover, the Boas conspiracy shows up in chat rooms, commentaries, and myriad online articles in a narrative form that differs little from the way Rockwell outlined it some forty years ago.

Since 2002, this conspiracy has found new footing in the aftermath of Corey Sparks and Richard Jantz’s report in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that suggested Boas published erroneous conclusions in his pivotal work *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1912)—the landmark study that proved to be critical in undermining the idea of racial typologies and rigid racial categories (Brand 2003). The two authors reanalyzed Boas’s statistical findings, generated from measurements taken from a sample population of nearly eighteen thousand New York City immigrants and their children, thus explicitly challenging the empirical foundation of Boas’s influential study (Sparks and Jantz 2002). *Changes in Bodily Form* was the first authoritative text that documented biological plasticity and it has been routinely cited as evidence that the environment plays an integral role in cranial plasticity and the morphology of so-called racial types (Gravlee et al. 2003:25). Sparks and Jantz concluded that “reanalysis of Boas’s data not only fails to support his [Boas’s] contention that cranial plasticity is a primary source of cranial variation but rather supports what morphologists and morphometricians have known for a long time: most of the variation is genetic variation” (Sparks and Jantz 2002:14637). The same day that the National Academy reported the Sparks and Jantz findings, Nicholas Wade of the *New York Times* ran an article titled “A New Look at Old Data May Discredit a Theory on Race” (Wade 2002: F3), which prompted a flurry of email, discussion, and commentary from a range of divergent perspectives (Holloway 2002; Francis 2002).

Sam Francis, the former *Washington Times* columnist turned ultra-right-wing pundit, seized this opportunity to tether the results of Sparks and Jantz to Derek Freeman’s widely publicized allegations that Margaret Mead engaged in fraudulent research practices in Samoa (Freeman 1983, 1999). Taken together, Francis argued, this was proof positive that anthropologists in general and Franz Boas in particular orchestrated a vast left-wing conspiracy to destroy the idea that whites are racially superior to blacks and to impose a moral and cultural relativism that has forever crippled American civilization, and that Boas did it with fraudulent data. Francis elaborated: “In other words, Boas decided what his conclusions would be before he finished the research and then ‘shaded’—i.e., cheated on—the data to make them support the conclusion he wanted. This is not science; it’s fraud—and modern liberalism is founded on it” (Francis 2002).



Francis did not, however, note how Clarence C. Gravlee, H. Russell Bernard, and William R. Leonard also reanalyzed Boas's data on immigrant bodies. Reporting their independent findings in *American Anthropologist*, Gravlee and his colleagues concluded that "on the whole, Boas was right, despite the limited analytical tools at his disposal" (Gravlee et al. 2003:125). The Associated Press quickly syndicated a story about the dissimilar findings and *Science* ran an article aptly titled "Going Head-to-Head Over Boas's Data," but this type of balanced reporting did not sway the conspiracy theorists; these proponents saw only Sparks and Jantz's work confirming their *X-Files* mantra—"The truth is out there" (Bergstrom 2002; Holden 2002).

The Boas conspiracy and the scientific racism of Rockwell were eventually rendered insignificant in the mainstream media during the 1960s as much by new understandings of culture, the environment, and population genetics, as by the sea change of attitudes and perspectives brought on by that decade's torrent of social change. It was taken up, however, with renewed attention by the likes of George Lincoln Rockwell and it still festers in circles that still despise integration.

The historical significance of American Anthropological Association, American Association of Physical Anthropologists, and American Association for the Advancement of Science efforts to contribute to the movement toward civil rights by issuing statements on race perhaps pales in comparison with the efforts made by members of such organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. But these statements remain important documents of the civil rights movement because they signaled that science in general and anthropology in particular buttressed the persuasive legal, moral, political, and religious arguments marshaled by so many to effect irrevocable change. Even at the time the statements were issued, however, they were somewhat anachronistic, because they were written just as much of anthropology began viewing itself less in scientific and domestic terms. Dell Hymes, Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, and Stanley Diamond each piloted cultural anthropology in new directions, but less attention was being paid to U.S. racism and African American culture, despite the efforts of scholars like William Willis, St. Clair Drake, and Carol Stack.

Simultaneously, the explicit scientific racism proffered by people associated with the International Association for the Advancement of Ethnology and Eugenics along with its Boas conspiracy became anachronistic as William Shockley and Arthur Jensen articulated more sophisticated forms of scientific racism to quietly replace it. The explicit racist science of Putnam and the IAAEE, together with their Boas conspiracy, however, continued to find legitimation within groups of Neo-

Nazis and white supremacists during the late 1960s. As George Lincoln Rockwell so dramatically demonstrated, hard-core white supremacists clung to the simple narratives regarding race mixing and civilization and steeped it in virulent anti-Semitism.

Although Boas was routinely equivocal when it came to discussions of racial equality, his work on race served as an important scientific bulwark for civil rights advocates and was ultimately responsible for landing him on that list with Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, Earl Warren, and Martin Luther King Jr.—not bad company to keep.

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