

## **D.1. the Influence of Boas**

In the 1920s and 1930s anthropology assumed its present form as a four-field academic profession in the United States under the influence of German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas wanted anthropology to be a well-respected science. He was interested in all areas of anthropological research and had done highly regarded fieldwork in all areas except archaeology. As a professor at Columbia University in New York City from 1899 until his retirement in 1937, he helped define the discipline and trained many of the most prominent American anthropologists of the 20th century. Many of his students—including Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead—went on to establish anthropology departments at universities throughout the country.

Boas stressed the importance of anthropologists conducting original fieldwork to get firsthand experiences with the cultures they wished to describe. He also opposed racist and ethnocentric evolutionary theories. Based on his own studies, including his measurement of the heads of people from many cultures, Boas argued that genetic differences among human populations could not explain cultural variation.

Boas urged anthropologists to do detailed research on particular cultures and their histories, rather than attempt to construct grand evolutionary stages for all of humankind in the tradition of Morgan and Tylor. Boas's theoretical approach became known as historical particularism, and it forms the basis for the fundamental anthropological concept of cultural relativism.