

# From Biological Determinism to Cultural Relativism: Eugenic Contribution to Modern Cultural Anthropology

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In any survey-level cultural anthropology class taught in the United States, a student is likely to learn that a central tenet of the field is the idea of cultural relativism—that is, that each culture’s customs and ideas must be appraised solely on the basis of its own standards and conditions. This key principle—the antithesis of ethnocentrism and biological determinism—was preached by Franz Boas and supported by the work of his intellectual progeny of the early 20th century, many of whom toiled in the South Pacific and Australia to produce the crucial works that those same survey-level students read about in their textbooks. From Raymond Firth’s work in Tikopia, to A.R. Radcliffe-Browne’s studies in New South Wales, to Reo Fortune’s classic *The Sorcerers of Dobu*, to scores of other works by a dozen other authors, these pieces helped cement the idea of cultural relativism as a unifying theme in anthropology by the 1930s. How strange it is, then, that the field of cultural anthropology ultimately has the notorious racist Madison Grant and his eugenicist colleagues in the Galton Society to thank for these groundbreaking studies.

The Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man was founded in 1918 for the stated purpose of “the promotion of study of racial anthropology, and of the origin, migration, physical and mental characters, crossings and evolution of human races, living and extinct.”<sup>1</sup> As straightforward as this description sounds, it belies the more significant unstated reasons for the society’s existence. At this time in anthropology’s development as a field of study, there was a profound and deepening division within the field between cultural and physical (or biological) anthropologists for ideological control of the discipline’s main organization, the American Anthropological Association. Since the mid-1800s, the field of anthropology primarily had been focused on mankind’s physical characteristics, particularly those affiliated with race and ethnicity. The anthropologist’s main tools were his calipers, and it was said only half in jest that an anthropologist “will measure a head at the drop of a hat.” Biological determinism was presupposed by these early American anthropologists, who assumed there were behavioral correlates to physical and racial features.<sup>2</sup>

Starting in the late 1800s, however, Franz Boas had begun to

challenge this basic assumption. Although well-trained and published in physical anthropological techniques, Boas largely rejected the biological determinism of most of his peers and helped pioneer the field of modern cultural anthropology and the concomitant idea of cultural relativism. From his department at Columbia University came new generations of Ph.D.s committed to establishing the Boas conception of cultural anthropology in new graduate departments throughout the United States. By the 1910s, this coterie of young academics had begun to pose a serious challenge to the traditionalists of the profession, who still maintained their commitment to what amounted to scientific racism. The fact that Boas and many of his students were Jewish only confirmed the worst suspicions of a group of people prone to view people in racial hierarchies. The thought that the Boas faction might be gaining control of the major anthropological organizations in the United States was almost too much for some of the old guard to bear.<sup>3</sup>

A self-proclaimed member of this old guard was Madison Grant. A wealthy lawyer and dilettante naturalist, Grant had written the best-selling book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). It, along with Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (with an introduction by Grant), argued that the "white race" was in dire, perhaps irretrievable peril of being swamped by other inferior groups of people and their radical ideas. Thus, when Grant and his colleagues promulgated the Galton Society, the official desire to keep physical anthropology in the forefront of the field was in truth only one reason. A second, unofficial desire (stated privately in a letter between charter members Charles Benedict Davenport and Henry Fairfield Osborn) was to have an "anthropological society . . . with a central governing body, self-elected and self-perpetuating, and very limited in members, and also confined to native Americans,<sup>4</sup> who are anthropologically, socially and politically sound, no Bolsheviki need apply."<sup>5</sup> With these official and unofficial motivations, Grant and his fellow "native Americans" hoped to save the profession of anthropology, and perhaps their own race.<sup>6</sup>

It is far too easy to see these people as little more than bigoted crackpots. However, such ideas were far more widely embraced among the American intellectual establishment then than they are now. Despite the questionable scholarly credentials of Grant, the society as a whole boasted a relatively impressive academic pedigree. Charter members included Princeton Professor E.G. Conklin, Columbia professors J.H. McGregor and George S. Huntington, Columbia Professor and American Museum of Natural History curator William King Gregory, President of the American Museum

of Natural History Henry Fairfield Osborn, and President of the Carnegie Institution J.C. Merriam. This already distinguished company grew within a few years to include famed psychologist Robert Yerkes, Harvard's head of anthropology Earnest Hooton, Johns Hopkins biologist Raymond Pearl, and England's premier anatomists Sir Grafton Eliot Smith and Sir Arthur Keith. The distinguished and exclusive membership of the organization afforded it much greater credibility than it would have engendered if its membership had consisted entirely of the likes of Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard. However, despite its prestigious membership list and lofty ambitions, the society struggled to make a significant impact on the anthropological community. Attendance at meetings and symposia was usually poor, and relatively few members took an active role in society affairs.<sup>7</sup> Disappointed at how short his organization had fallen from realizing his ambitions for it, Grant in 1923 called upon the membership of the society to help cement its place and purpose by undertaking "some significant scientific investigation of broad human interest, such as might prove to be of definite and tangible benefit to mankind, both in the immediate future and in the centuries to come."<sup>8</sup> By November of that year, the membership felt that they had a winning idea.

The society's proposal was authored by William King Gregory, Associate Professor of Vertebrate Paleontology at Columbia and Curator of Comparative Anatomy at the American Museum of Natural History. It at once demonstrated the group's grand ambitions, its strict biological deterministic philosophy, and its overt (if seemingly paternalistic) racism:

[T]he widespread checking of disease and the general prolongation of life in various parts of the world are not being effected without grave danger for the future of humanity, since hereditary diseases and mental and moral inferiority are increasing with shocking rapidity. . . . Unless the danger is recognized soon and the public is led to larger and more effective cooperation with the Eugenics movement, the ruthless processes of Natural Selection must inevitably reassert themselves and a civilization based on physical and moral inferiority may fall into ruin from within.

One of the most immediate needs of the science of man is to find out how Natural Selection operates within some of the more primitive races of mankind, such as are still extant, although in rapidly diminishing numbers, in certain remote

parts of the world. Much is known as to the languages and customs of savage races but almost nothing is known of them from the viewpoint of modern biological anthropology . . . . The present and future status of civilized races can be appreciated only by comparison with the conditions in primitive peoples, in which immediate selective effects of disease have not been largely neutralized by medical science . . . .

In brief, the Society proposes to undertake an intensive and many-sided biological study of the aborigines of Australia, not only because these are the most primitive people known today, but also because they are dying so fast from introduced diseases that, unless wise and prompt measures to save them are taken, soon the priceless knowledge that may still be gleaned from them will be gone forever.<sup>9</sup>

Gregory proposed that the society (with the cooperation of the Australian government and scientists) should set up a field station among aborigines still “in a fairly ‘wild’ state of life” and conduct anthropometric and physiological measurements in the process of administering medical aid. The project would be directed by members Charles Davenport of the Carnegie Institution, Clark Wissler from the American Museum of Natural History, and Charles Stockard of Cornell University Medical College. An ambitious project, the undertaking was projected to last at least three years and cost more than \$40,000. This posed a significant problem. Although rich in prestigious members, the Galton Society was poor in finances, and could not begin to fund an expedition of this scale. Fortunately for the organization, the answer to their problem lay just a few streets away from Madison Grant’s 49th Street office.<sup>10</sup>

The Rockefeller Foundation had been founded in New York City only a few years before in order to rationalize and make more efficient J.D. Rockefeller’s numerous philanthropies. One of the main components of the new foundation was an aggressive agenda of supporting programs and projects in the social sciences. Rockefeller (and his son, who was much more active in the organization) personally believed that if the relatively new fields of the social sciences were as well-established as the natural sciences and could discover the basic laws of society, this information could ultimately be used to improve the conditions of human life around the planet. Because of the premium this philosophy put on direct and practical application to

contemporary human affairs, the foundation gave relatively little—only four percent of its total social science budget—to anthropology projects until it explicitly ceased all funding to anthropology in the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, in its early years, the Foundation experimented with funding for some anthropology projects with potential practical application.<sup>11</sup>

Eager to tap this lucrative source of funding for their project, the Galton Society in December 1923 sent a formal application to the Rockefeller Foundation for a \$50,000 grant to cover equipment and expenses. Knowing well Rockefeller's interest in practical application, Grant appended a note with the proposal stating "I trust this plan will appeal to Mr. Rockefeller because the study of primitive man is the best approach to a proper understanding of the artificial conditions of selection now operating in civilized communities."<sup>12</sup> The proposed study included a rank-ordered list of research priorities, focusing primarily on anthropometric and physiological tests, but also including general intelligence tests, investigations into temperament, instincts, reaction to disease, and vital statistics. Last among these priorities (and almost certainly least in the opinion of the Galton Society membership) was a reference to the study of various factors of culture and social organization.<sup>13</sup>

Gregory, Grant, and the other members of the society must have been gratified at the strong interest their proposal piqued in Rockefeller Foundation administrators. Over the next few months, the foundation held formal interviews with the membership and sent a flurry of letters to determine the feasibility of supporting such a project. By mid-1924 it became clear that they were very interested in funding the project in excess even of the sum Gregory had originally proposed. In a few short months the Galton Society had succeeded in their goal of beginning a "significant scientific investigation of broad human interest." In this, the moment of their organization's greatest success, none of the Galton Society's members could have predicted just how completely they would fail in realizing their vision. In finding a benefactor for their project, they had at the same time lost control of it forever.<sup>14</sup>

The Rockefeller Foundation's style in setting up major benefactions around the world was to work through institutions and organizations already established in the given locality. From a very early point in the process, administrators at the foundation had decided that if the project were going to be done, it would be done through the Australian universities and the Australian National Research Council (ANRC). The Second Pan-Pacific Science Congress just the previous year had strongly pushed for the foundation of an anthropology department in Australia. Out of respect for their geographi-

cal and intellectual independence, the Rockefeller Foundation believed that the initiative for this project must come from the Australians themselves. In what can only be termed a very polite extortion letter, the Rockefeller Foundation informed the Galton Society that they were prepared to start the feasibility study and fund the project only if it were to be initiated and run by Australians, with Galton members reduced to an as-yet undetermined advisory role. If the society refused, the feasibility study would not proceed and (by implication) the project would die. Faced with this near ultimatum, the Galton Society acquiesced. Although this was likely a tough pill for the organization to swallow, it probably was not a difficult decision to make. After all, the Rockefeller Foundation had all but committed their vast resources to the group's basic plan, and had dispatched one of their own—corresponding member G. Elliot Smith—to Australia to solicit the Australian scientists to make the plan a reality. What could possibly go wrong?<sup>15</sup>

Well, quite a lot actually, although the initial stages of the project went fairly well from the Galton Society's perspective. G. Elliot Smith's visit to Australia was a success, and the Australian Universities and Government pledged their support for the project. The Rockefeller Foundation agreed to finance the formation of Australia's first university department of anthropology, and had received the acceptance of Dr. John Hunter, a well-respected anatomist, to head the department and coordinate the measurements of the aboriginal tribes. To determine where the department was to be located and survey the status of Australian universities in general, it dispatched a formal fact-finding commission to Australia and New Zealand that included Galton Society member Clark Wissler. By May of 1926, the Rockefeller Foundation had committed up to \$20,000 a year for five years not only for the formation of the Department of Anthropology at Sydney, but also the funding of numerous fellowships and grants to investigators willing to do anthropological work among the natives. However, by the time the Foundation had officially signed off on what would become a more than \$100,000 investment, the project had already changed dramatically by a combination of chance and design.<sup>16</sup>

The chance element was introduced by the unexpected difficulty of finding and keeping candidates for the chair of the new anthropology department at Sydney. John Hunter, the anatomist who was their first choice, died suddenly from typhoid fever in December 1924. On the strong recommendation of G. Elliot Smith, the Foundation's second choice was Dr. Davidson Black of the Peking Medical School, picked because he was a respected anatomist who would be well-equipped to conduct the kind of

biological research the Foundation and the Galton Society had in mind. After several months of consideration, Black turned down the offer and could not be persuaded to change his mind. At this point, right before the Rockefeller Foundation's fact-finding mission was to leave for Australia, the University of Sydney held a formal search for the position. Here is where the element of design enters, and as a result the nature of the project—and indeed the history of anthropology—changed dramatically.<sup>17</sup>

The Australian National Research Council's conception for the Chair of Anthropology turned out to be significantly different from that of the Rockefeller Foundation's. The ANRC's formal proposal for the position and the department stated that "principal attention should be given to Social Anthropology," but that practical courses in law and colonial organization, tropical hygiene, geography, economics and statistics should also be offered. "In view of the imperative need of immediate study of the cultural and social aspects of native life whilst this is yet possible," the proposal concluded, "the Council was strongly of the opinion that the occupant of the Chair should be selected with special reference to his capacity to conduct the teaching and training of investigators along these lines."<sup>18</sup> With these premises in mind, the search focused on cultural anthropologists exclusively, including the renowned ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Eventually, the ANRC decided on the Cambridge graduate and relatively young cultural anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown.

The Rockefeller Foundation was less than pleased with the choice at first. The fact-finding commission heard about the appointment upon their arrival in Australia and sent an urgent coded telegram to Foundation offices asking about Radcliffe-Brown's credentials. The Foundation replied it was "not aware of anyone of this name who has acquired distinction in anthropology."<sup>19</sup> Such an assessment sounds ridiculous in hindsight. After graduation from Trinity College at Cambridge, Radcliffe-Brown had done fieldwork in the Andaman Islands, published numerous articles, and had just spent four years building the department of anthropology at the University of Capetown in South Africa into a large and successful program with both undergraduate and graduate students. However, if the Rockefeller Foundation's sources were still geared to thinking in terms of physical anthropologists, then its unfortunate assessment of Radcliffe-Brown's work is more understandable.

Despite its tepid initial opinion of the new chair, however, the Rockefeller Foundation had already committed itself to letting the Australian aca-

demics take the lead on this matter, and accepted the Research Council's choice. Nevertheless, the official grant of May 1926 made it clear that they still clung to the essentials of the project as envisioned by the Galton Society. While stating that the Foundation would provide matching funds for grants in a broad array of subjects including anatomy, archaeology, ethnology, geography, pathology, physiology, psychology, and sociology, the lucrative Rockefeller fellowships would be given only to top-notch researchers whose work had a "direct bearing on some biological aspect of human welfare."<sup>20</sup>

By this time, however, it was too late for the Galton Society or the Rockefeller Foundation to direct the nature of Australian anthropological research. Radcliffe-Brown found 40 students waiting to join the program when he arrived, and with these people and Rockefeller money he turned the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney into a crucible of research and base of support for cultural anthropologists throughout Australia and the Southwest Pacific. From Reo Fortune in Dobu to Raymond Firth in Tikopia, to more than a dozen other recipients of Rockefeller grant money, the 170 books and articles produced as a direct result of the Australian project are of incalculable significance to the anthropological literature. Even seventy-five years after the initial grants were made, a cursory search in the *Social Science Citation Index* turns up literally hundreds of references to these works over the past ten years—practically one citation a week—and nearly all of them for the cultural anthropological works produced during the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the pieces produced by the Australian researchers helped establish cultural relativism as a central tenet of anthropology, overthrowing once and for all the 19th-century biological determinism model in mainstream anthropological circles.<sup>21</sup>

Thus it is that by a strangely ironic twist, the Galton Society ultimately succeeded in its stated goal for the Australian research it brought into being. The organization's original idea was to embark on a "significant scientific investigation of broad human interest, such as might prove to be of definite and tangible benefit to mankind, both in the immediate future and in the centuries to come." By these standards, the Australian project that the Galton Society started was very successful, and in the process it helped destroy acceptance of the eugenic ideals its members held so dear.

## NOTES

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1. John S. Haller, Jr., *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 148-151; Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics:*

*Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 133-135.

2. See, for example, John S. Haller, Jr., *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

3. J. P. Spiro, "Nordic vs. anti-Nordic: The Galton Society and the American Anthropological Association," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36 (January 2002): 35-48.

4. "Native Americans" at this time was understood to mean those born in the United States (usually of European descent), as opposed to immigrants.

5. Charles B. Davenport to Henry F. Osborn, 18 April 1918, Charles Benedict Davenport Papers, Collection B:D27, American Philosophical Society.

6. Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 67-69.

7. Memorandum of Membership of the Galton Society. Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center; Barkan, *The Retreat*, 68.

8. Gregory to Grant, 22 November 1923, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center.

9. Gregory to Grant, 22 November 1923, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center.

10. Ibid.

11. Kevin Jones-Kern, "Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and . . . J. D. Rockefeller?: The Role of the Rockefeller Foundation in the History of American Anthropology." *American Association of the Behavioral and Social Sciences Journal* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 147-152.

12. Grant to Raymond Fosdick, 29 December 1923, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center.

13. "Memo Concerning Investigation of the Native Australians," attachment of Grant to Fosdick, 11 January 1924, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center.

14. See for example Fosdick to Beardsley Ruml, 3 January 1924; Davenport to Edwin Embree, 3 March 1924; Embree to Davenport, 6 March 1924; Embree to G. Elliot Smith, 19 March 1924; Embree to Davidson Black, 19 March 1924; Embree to Davenport, 10 April 1924; Embree to Clark Wissler, 11 April 1924; Embree to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 16 April 1924, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center.

15. Embree to Gregory, 8 May 1924; Gregory to Embree, 12 May 1924. Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23, Rockefeller Archives Center.

16. Smith to Embree, 19 May 1924, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 23; "Rivett" (Secretary, Natural Research Council of Australia) to John Hunter, 24 October 1924; Smith to Embree, 30 September 1924; 26 October 1924, 16 December 1924; Embree to Hunter, 13 November 1924; Embree to

Smith, 13 November 1924; "Vice-Chancellor MacCallum" to Embree, 7 July 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 24; Embree to Gregory, 26 January 1925; Embree to Smith, 3 February 1925; G.H. Wilkins to Wissler, 29 December 1924 (copy attached to Wissler to Embree, 21 April 1925); Wissler to Guy Stanton Ford, 21 April 1925; Smith to Embree, 17 June 1925; Embree to Dr. C. Purser, 1 July 1925; Embree to "My Dear Chief," 17 October 1925; Embree to G.E. Vincent, 10 November 1925, 20 December 1925; "Probably from Professor Martin" to Embree, 23 November 1925; Embree to MacCallum, 28 May 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 26; Minutes of Rockefeller Foundation, 6 April 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 27; "Australia—Appropriations to Research Council for Fellowships in Anthropology, 25 May 1927; Embree to Orme Masson, 27 May 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 29, Rockefeller Archives Center.

17. Smith to Embree, 9 December 1924, 16 December 1924, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 24; Smith to Embree, 20 January 1925, 17 June 1925, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 25; Embree to Smith, 26 December 1924; Smith to Embree, 30 December 1924, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 26, Rockefeller Archives Center.

18. Proposed Chair of Anthropology (Australian National Research Council), attachment to Smith to Embree, 17 June 1925, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 25, Rockefeller Archives Center.

19. Embree to Rockefeller Foundation (telegram), 16 November 1925, F.W. O'Connor to Embree (telegram), 18 November 1925, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 27, Rockefeller Archives Center.

20. Report to the Vice-Chancellor of Anthropology Selection Committee, 16 September 1925, attached to Vincent to A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, 7 January 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 3, folder 27, Rockefeller Archives Center; Embree to Masson, 27 May 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 2, folder 29, Rockefeller Archives Center.

21. Radcliffe-Brown to Embree, 19 October 1926, Rockefeller Grant Collection, Record Group 1.1, Series 410D, Subseries Anthropology, Box 2, folder 29, Rockefeller Archives Center; A. P. Elkin, "Anthropological Research in Australia and the Western Pacific, 1927-1937," *Oceania* 8 (March 1938): 306-327.