

Nurture, Not Nature

Wokeism and The Anthropological Origins of Gender Bending



Margaret Mead in Samoa

by Geoffrey Clarfield

American cultural anthropology has a lot to answer for.

Its icons—people like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Edward Sapir—were the indispensable precursors of the woke ideology now so deeply entrenched in our schools and universities, courts, politics, and business.

This is not to say that cultural anthropology is the sole source of wokeism, but that its contribution was seminal. Its mid-twentieth-century practitioners took what began as a simple field method, cultural relativism, and by insensible degrees transformed it into a philosophical movement. What started out as the common-sense proposition that you could

only understand a culture from the inside was soon transformed into the rather different notion that every culture was just as good as every other culture, and that there was no ground on which to prefer one over the other.

There is nothing about the first proposition that leads inexorably or logically to the second. So, what might explain the leap of faith and logic? One little-examined possibility is that these pioneers of American cultural anthropology were looking outside America for examples of cultures that accepted, or even celebrated, sexual and other behaviors that appealed to them but that were socially sanctioned at home.

The logic is clear. If Culture A finds Behavior B normal, then, when other cultures designate B “abnormal,” that designation is arbitrary, not natural. If America finds same-sex attraction “unnatural,” but South Sea Islanders don’t, then America cannot claim its attitudes are rooted in nature. They must be mere prejudice instead, and persistent prejudice cannot be morally justified.

But what if these early practitioners of cultural anthropology, driven by a desire to “normalize” their own behavior at home, committed the cardinal scientific sin of reading into cultures what they needed to find there, rather than describing those cultures as they found them? If so, subsequent anthropological investigations of those same cultures would not reproduce the pioneers’ original findings, and cultural anthropology’s contribution to the intellectual foundations of wokeism would be revealed as a sham and a travesty. This article presents the prosecution’s case against cultural anthropology’s American founders.

We must begin with woke ideology itself.

However incoherent it may be, it comprises a number of key themes we can identify. Think of them as a gestalt—they are

largely irrational, but they are nonetheless related ideological ideas, permeated by anger and resentment.

The first is that everything is subjective: your truth, my truth, their truth. There is no objective reality. So-called objective reality is, in fact, a social construct invented by those who exercise power to disguise their oppression of women, minorities, and non-Western peoples. Oppressed groups gain moral standing based on their presumed degree of oppression, just as privileged oppressor groups lose such standing by the reverse process. Anyone can become a minority or grievance group, as these are subjective—so long as you are not white, middle class, Jewish or Christian, and male.

“Women,” who have never been a minority, get to claim oppressed status because they have not enjoyed “power,” unless, of course, they are white, in which case they can be dismissed as privileged “Karens,” founts of “white women’s tears.” And then there is the real minority of African Americans improbably spoken for by Black Lives Matter, who affect a racialized Marxism by virtue of which, economically, whites are bad guys and blacks good guys.

Finally, as science is male oppression writ large, then the biological sex binary and diverse sexual orientations do not come from nature. One outcropping of this is to dispense with the idea of the objective and observable realities that undermine linguistic practices such as standard pronouns, bestowing upon us the plethora of pronouns that have made a mockery of liberal arts colleges and universities whose faculty and administration give in to these Stalinist speech fads.

Not all of these ideas came from modern American cultural anthropology, but most find their roots there.

In particular, three aspects of wokeism emerged from cultural anthropology, and then “went viral” during the 1960s as

college-going baby boomers used these ideas to revolt against Western civilization:

1. cultural relativism;
2. the “privileging” of what were once described as primitive cultures; and
3. the normalization and adoption of sexual practices that could be found in tribal societies but that differed from the monogamous West.

To trace all of the debts wokeism owes to American cultural anthropology would require a book. In this short essay I am going to focus on one of wokeism’s central tenets, namely, that there are no longer two sexes, grounded in an objective biology, but a universe of “genders” that arise from a wondrously complex set of ever-more finely defined subjective identities. In a few generations we went from Fowler’s dictum in his *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*—“**gender**, n., is a grammatical term only. To talk of *persons* or *creatures of the masculine or feminine g[ender]*, meaning of the *male or female* sex is either a jocularly ... or a blunder”—to a female nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court declaring that she is not competent to define what a woman is.

How did this happen?

The proximate origins of this key idea that sexual identity is a choice, part of nurture and not nature, began among a highly educated and sophisticated group of cultural anthropologists at Columbia University in New York about a century ago. Margaret Mead was one of the most influential of them. To be sympathetic with something that got out of hand, we must look at what they were reacting against—it was not pretty.

During the nineteenth century the settling of the Americas and

the European colonization of Asia and Africa brought Europeans face to face with non-literate tribal peoples and literate Asian agrarian states whose language, religion and worldview were often seen as foreign, exotic, and “savage.”

As the nineteenth century was an age of both romanticism and science, Westerners created a way to describe, catalog, and compare the “lifeways” of these various peoples with each other and with that of the advanced industrial civilizations of Euro-America. This is called ethnography or ethnology. In the first word we have a definition from Greek—the description of an *ethnos*, or ethnic group.

And so, scientists, explorers, and missionaries spread around the world. They learned local languages. They watched and recorded rituals and music, and they began to see how the various institutions of a society formed a whole. This was largely because they had to administer what were mostly newly conquered peoples and figure out what aspects of their behaviors they would tolerate and what they would censure, like witchcraft in Sub-Saharan Africa or wife burning in Hindu India (suttee).

These were the first ethnographers, and they include a minority of scientific adventurers who traveled and lived among traditional peoples with the sole goal of eliciting ethnographies and comparing them.

This is what they set out to describe, in the words of the British founder of anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor, who in 1871 redefined the word “culture” in a way that made sense to both field and armchair anthropologists: “... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

By the early twentieth century, the archives of governments and learned societies—such as the Royal Geographical Society

in London or the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.—were filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of ethnographies, many of them completed in loving detail. The [*Jesuit Relations*](#) of the Jesuit fathers who worked among Canadian Indians are among the most impressive.

One of the key organizing themes behind comparative ethnographies and the comparative history that often emerged from them was the notion of progress. Historical, technological, and social change seemed to indicate that humankind as a whole had “progressed” from spear to factory and from group-based legal systems to systems based on individual rights within the law. There was much to debate about what progress really was and how we could measure it. But then, people started reading Darwin and applied his theories to a more draconian notion of progress: social Darwinism. Ethnographers had been looking for a key that would allow them to compare and rank human societies from “primitive” to “civilized.” They did so by abusing and misusing Darwin’s writings, developing a worldview called social Darwinism, which later gave birth to eugenics, and which was a central core of Nazism and the Final Solution.

It was Herbert Spencer, a late-Victorian social theorist, who came up with the expression “Survival of the Fittest” and who spent a lifetime reading ethnographies so that he could come up with a universal taxonomy of societies and cultures, those “complex wholes” as defined by Tylor. If you go to any good university library and examine the many tomes of comparative ethnography that he created, along with his accompanying charts, you will be confronted with an encyclopedia of cultures ranked from “primitive to complex.”

The only problem with this classification, which spread far and wide among Western elites, was the assumption that since they were now members of the most powerful cultures on earth, they were the Darwinian winners, and the other cultures were thought to be less than “fully human” and worthy of

destruction, displacement, assimilation, or death.

This classification also included a simple world ranking of racial types: white Europeans at the top, followed by Mediterranean types, Asiatics (which often included Jews and Gypsies), Indians of the Americas, and, at the bottom, blacks. This worldview only ended after the Holocaust. The Nazis were rather efficient in getting rid of their blacks, and then their Jews. The schemes varied by author, but the principle remained the same. White on top, dark at the bottom.

In nineteenth-century Germany these social Darwinist ideas were gaining currency in German intellectual circles, and Jews were definitely considered to be less human than "Aryans." Franz Boas was an assimilated German Jew who understood the pernicious racism and antisemitism of this new worldview, and as a PhD in geography he set off to live and study the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, who in days gone by were called the Eskimos. He also made detailed ethnographic studies of other Indian tribes such as the Haida of British Columbia.

Boas had many goals. He wanted to train other scholars and students to go among the world's "primitive" peoples and ethnographically show their distinctive differences. Methodologically, he wanted to show the social Darwinists that there were no rules or laws of social development—this is the distinctive and redeeming value of what came to be called American cultural anthropology. Then he wanted to show that, although cultures were distinctive, they were as distinctive from one another as individuals are from one another.

According to Boas, in order to understand a foreign culture, one had to adopt an attitude that he called "cultural relativism," which implied that one must suspend judgment before living among, describing, eliciting, or even analyzing a foreign culture. Slowly, among such Boasian disciples as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Lee Whorf, this perspective brought into question the verities of

Euro-American civilization. Anthropologists, based on their field experience, began to suggest that, perhaps, other lifestyles and other sexualities made some people happier than others, which is to say *us*.

I believe that Boas also wanted to destroy the social Darwinist framework that threatened him as a Jew and that prevented Jews from being accepted as full members of modern Western democracies.

The last goal was done with great subtlety, for during one study he showed that any so-called “innate” racial and physical differences among immigrants to the U.S. disappeared as their children, drinking the freedom and eating the good food of the Americas, grew larger and stronger than their parents, whether they were from Finland or Sicily. And so, he elevated nurture above nature. As we shall see, after many decades that has become a kind of sexual Pandora’s box.

If the social Darwinists were the champions of nature, then Boas and his students became the champions of nurture—that is to say, culture, arguing that the culture one is born into can put its stamp on human nature and produce endless varieties.

Here is the kernel of the contemporary political value that gender is a social construct, which is now mainstream in our institutions, if not among our voting citizens as well. In truth, sexual temperament is not a simple function of being born male or female. There is something to this argument, but that would demand its own disciplined essay on what we now know about genetics, biology, epidemiology, psychiatry, and culture, a database that is less than thirty years old in its various scientific and medical manifestations.

For the first half of the twentieth century, eugenics had the medical and political establishments at its feet, and its solution to their pseudoscience of race and purported genetic malfunctions among immigrants and the poor was a state-

sanctioned policy of sterilization and castration of thousands of poor people that did not stop until the 1960s.

And so, to be fair, we must remember American cultural anthropologists from the perspective of what they fought against, as well from the perspective of what their baby boomer students did with their intellectual legacy.

The pivotal figure in our story—the cultural anthropological hinge, as it were, between social Darwinism and wokeism—is Margaret Mead.

Mead was born to a solidly middle-class family in Philadelphia. Her childhood was uneventful, marred only by a partly withered arm. Extremely bright and curious, she ended up as an undergraduate student of anthropology at Barnard College. She added a further disability when she broke her ankle in a car accident, something that made her walk with a bit of limp for the rest of her life.

She studied with Franz Boas and familiarized herself with the historical, archaeological, and anthropological data on Polynesia, a series of cultures that had given anthropologists the concept of “taboo,” which they then used to explain, or at least describe, similar phenomena among the world’s tribal peoples and those of the ancient world.

At the time of her study, the American elite were concerned about what we now call the trauma of puberty and teenage rebellion. Boas and Mead wondered if, perhaps, it was different in another culture, and so she found the funding and was off to American Samoa, where she eventually set up her base in the house of an American doctor. There, she broke with methodological tradition and focused her work not on adults but on children and young females. She learned the local language and “hung out”—that is to say, did participant observation and numerous interviews. According to her data and

experience, she found that adolescents were indeed sexually active before marriage, but both boys and girls took all of this with a lightness and ease that was the opposite of the mainstream American attitude. She eventually came back to the U.S. and published her results in a popular book titled [*Coming of Age in Samoa*](#) (1928). It became a bestseller and catapulted the young Mead to fame. This was quickly followed by a book on her New Guinea fieldwork, [*Growing Up in New Guinea*](#) (1930).

As the able chronicler of American cultural anthropology Charles King has written in his fascinating book [*Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century*](#):

The new book sealed her position as an outspoken, even scandalous public scientist, given her frank discussions of sex and her refusal to acknowledge the self-evident superiority of Western civilization. She had become, seemingly overnight, one of the country's foremost experts on the relevance of the most remote parts of the globe for understanding what was happening back home.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Mead's insights and deductions about life in general, her fieldwork was decent, and her fame never left her. I have read much of her work on childhood in Bali that she conducted before WWII, and it is a solid work of visual anthropology harnessed to a desire to understand childhood and the development of Balinese emotions.

Regarding sexuality, one learns from Mead's work that it is extremely malleable by culture. She wrote persuasively that, from a Western point of view, some cultures seem more masculine and others more feminine. There is something to this. Anglos still feel this way about themselves vis-à-vis the supposedly effeminate French, although Frenchmen can be just as violent as, let us say, Britons or Americans.

Basing herself at the American Museum of Natural History and

allying herself with other students and colleagues of Boas, such as Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir, Mead and her colleagues recruited and engaged a whole generation of cultural anthropologists who spread out across the Americas and the world to see how different cultures “solve” the challenges that biology gives to all of us. If you read their monographs and arguments without prejudice, as I have tried to do over the decades, you can only admire their fieldwork methods, mastery of local languages, and attempts in English to sympathetically help us understand the systematic nature of other societies and cultures.

As an undergraduate and graduate student of both American cultural anthropology and British social anthropology, I read with fascination how different nonindustrial cultures organized their lives. I marveled at African polygamy, Navaho sorcery, Indian and Buddhist cosmology, Aztec human sacrifice, polyandry (when many men share one wife), and the descriptions of sex and courting among various peoples.

All of my professors were, in some sense, disciples of Mead and her ilk. This was during the seventies and eighties. The sexual revolution and the gay liberation movement were in full swing, and the ethnographies that we read and discussed seemed to say, “Well, if they can do it this way in Polynesia, then we can do it this way in America. To hell with the Bible and the Protestant ethic.”

Not once did any of my professors say that, once you are socialized in the West, the adoption of foreign customs out of context may have unintended, deleterious consequences like sexually transmitted diseases.

I have little doubt that the ethnographies that Mead and her students have carried out during the last century have merit as documents of other cultures and other worldviews. And I

sympathize with their original goals to take on the eugenics that became part of the playbook in Nazi Germany and America. However, when I look at the personal life of Margaret Mead, I suspect that, at both the conscious and unconscious levels, she was looking for her own justification of a life lived outside the norm.

In this context it is telling that, after Mead's death, an Australian anthropologist, Derek Freeman, went through Mead's data and his own similar fieldwork; he concluded that Mead was wrong about the easygoing nature of her island Samoans. This caused a large kerfuffle in the anthropological community, as Mead was not alive to defend herself, and there was a sixty-year gap between the work of Mead and Freeman. The literature on this topic is vast, and I have not read all of it, but the controversy lends further credence to the idea that Mead may have, consciously or unconsciously, smuggled her own cultural and social preoccupations about America into her work on Samoa.

As an undergraduate, Mead had many same-sex "crushes" on other female students, and it is documented that, in some cases, she approached them in a sexual manner. Then she fell in love with her teaching assistant, another student of Boas and a gifted anthropologist, Ruth Benedict. This was reciprocated physically while she was engaged to be married. She went through with the marriage, and then had an affair with the great linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir. She then had an affair with a New Zealand anthropologist named Reo Fortune, which caused her to finally end her marriage while maintaining her romantic liaison with Benedict. It would appear, in retrospect, that the focus of her emotional life rotated around Benedict, but that is hard to say for certain. Simply put, one might reasonably conclude that, at some level, Mead was looking to justify her lifestyle in America by finding examples of it in other cultures..

Given this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mead

would have been considered a pioneer of sexual liberation, and not just of cultural anthropology. The most amusing example of this is the autobiography of a gay anthropologist named Esther Newton, published in 2000. The front cover is a picture of a crumpled sheet on a bed. The title? [*Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*](#). According to the Duke University Press website:

Margaret Mead Made Me Gay is the intellectual autobiography of cultural anthropologist Esther Newton, a pioneer in gay and lesbian studies. Chronicling the development of her ideas from the excitement of early feminism in the 1960s to friendly critiques of queer theory in the 1990s, this collection covers a range of topics such as why we need more precise sexual vocabularies, why there have been fewer women doing drag than men, and how academia can make itself more hospitable to queers. It brings together such classics as “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian” and “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen” with entirely new work such as “Theater: Gay Anti-Church.”

Twenty-three years ago (almost one generation, in “heteronormative English”), this book might have been tolerated, even encouraged by the rest of the anthropological community. But during the last quarter century its worldview has spread across academia, the media, our governments, and our public schools and school boards, which are now home to a conscious, aggressive gay and transhumanist agenda that encourages children to consider gender reassignment, irreversible, self-damaging surgery, and destructive hormone treatment. And Newton herself credits her intellectual and sexual odyssey at least in part to the liberating influence of Margaret Mead.

Mead and her colleagues succeeded in challenging the darker side of Western civilization (eugenics), but they threw out the baby with the bathwater. Alongside cultural anthropologists, radical feminists, Marxists, and haters of the West have given us a generation of Tenured Radicals,

mostly baby boomers, who have indoctrinated Generation Z. They have created a generation that now sees Western civilization as the problem, not the solution, to the question of how one should live life.

It should be said that the contempt with which same-sex relationships were viewed in America in Mead's time was the cause of much unjustified misery. By contributing to a more balanced view of human sexuality, Mead's work was strongly positive. But gender ideology goes well beyond the normalization of gay sexuality—this, too, belongs on her balance sheet.

Mead and her fellow pioneers of American cultural anthropology were fabulously successful. I still read the reports of American anthropologists from Mead's day to today and marvel at their empirical excellence. But what she and her baby boomer students did with those reports bothers me a lot.

When the president of the United States endorses the transhumanist agenda and encourages children to change their sex surgically without their parents' permission, one may start to long for the good ol' days of patriarchy. Margaret Mead and her followers clearly have won the culture war.

Early American cultural anthropology's great legacy is the widespread adoption of the idea that nurture trumps nature. According to most of today's mainstream cultural anthropologists, the very concept of an objective nature outside humanity's control is just a propaganda tool of a power structure imposed by morally corrupt oppressors. If you publicly oppose that worldview, expect to be persecuted and prosecuted.

First published in [*Minding the Campus*](#).