

From Philosophy to Method: A Historical Epistemology of the Notion of Individuality in Boasian Anthropology

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Abstract: Through the interdisciplinary lens of historical epistemology, the present work aims to show that individuality is not only a cultural value but also a veritable epistemic operator. The Boasian concept of culture represents much more than a reaction against evolutionism. In his fieldworks, Boas effectively operationalised Herder's arguments about historicism and cultural particularity. Under these circumstances, their theoretical models require a detailed analysis. Historical epistemology shows how specific conceptual commitments determine the criteria for valid anthropological evidence. By tracing the epistemic use of individuality back to nineteenth-century German historicism, the present work illustrates significant continuities and discontinuities. From Herder, Boas inherited not only a solid concept of culture but also his epistemic values. The Boasians successfully employed the epistemic notion of individuality to limit imprudent explanatory ambitions while enabling a sustainable historical intelligibility. Individuality shifts from a theoretical construct in Herder's philosophical anthropology to a methodological frame in Boasian anthropology.

Keywords: Boas, Herder, individuality, culture, historical epistemology.

Titlu: „De la filosofie la metodă: o epistemologie istorică a noțiunii de individualitate în antropologia boasiană”

Rezumat: Prin prisma interdisciplinară a epistemologiei istorice, lucrarea de față își propune să demonstreze că individualitatea nu este doar o valoare culturală, ci și un veritabil operator epistemic. Conceptul boasian de cultură reprezintă mult mai mult decât o reacție împotriva evoluționismului. În lucrările sale de teren, Boas a operaționalizat eficient argumentele lui Herder despre istoricism și particularitate culturală. În aceste circumstanțe, modelele lor teoretice necesită o analiză detaliată. Epistemologia istorică arată cum angajamentele conceptuale specifice determină criteriile pentru dovezi antropologice valide. Urmărind utilizarea epistemică a individualității până la istorismul german din secolul al XIX-lea, lucrarea de față ilustrează continuități și discontinuități semnificative. De la Herder, Boas a moștenit nu numai un concept solid de cultură, ci și valorile sale epistemice. Cercetătorii boasieni au folosit cu succes noțiunea epistemică de individualitate pentru a limita ambițiile explicative imprudente, permițând în același timp o inteligibilitate istorică sustenabilă. Individualitatea se transformă dintr-o construcție teoretică în antropologia filosofică a lui Herder într-un cadru metodologic în antropologia boasiană.

Cuvinte-cheie: Boas, Herder, individualitate, cultură, epistemologie istorică.

Introduction

In contemporary academic discourses, the notion of individuality holds as special importance (Kipke 2025). The problem of universality *versus* individuality is a key question of anthropology. One of the main founders of American anthropology, Franz Boas, could not avoid this dilemma. "Boas remains an intellectual giant and is among the very few figures who can without a doubt be described as a founding figure for a whole academic tradition" (Porr 2023, 2). Through the lens of historical epistemology, the present work aims to show that individuality is not only a cultural value but also a veritable epistemic operator. For Boas, individual dimensions are much more than a simple descriptive tool. The choice between "the individuality in the totality, or the totality in the individuality" (Boas 1887, 140) became a major methodological issue.

Historically speaking, Johann Gottfried von Herder laid the foundations for the main concepts, theories, and methods in anthropology. As a critically aware researcher of the twentieth century, Boas did not blindly follow the Herderian postulates. He combined previous legacies with new contents (Eller 1988). On the whole, Boas made a massive shift in anthropological research and its institutional settings. He created new theoretical and methodological tools to help researchers get out their conventional laboratories and to gain new perspectives of cultural phenomena (Jacknis 2002)

The present study provides an in-depth analysis of Boasian anthropology through Herderian lenses in order to understand the numerous continuities and discontinuities in the idea of individuality. Boas's most prominent book *The Mind of Primitive Man* (Porr 2023) plays a central role because it showcases many of these metamorphoses. Since individuality is often defined in terms of relativist or ethical interpretations, its epistemic functions in Boasian epistemology appear obscured and unreadable. The main goal is to show that individuality performs as an epistemic principle that structures scientific explanations and comparisons. Instead of offering a traditional intellectual biography, this analysis reconstructs the epistemic role of individuality in the context of Boasian anthropology by tracing its ties to German historicism.

Literature Review

Williams (2005) defines individuality as a right and capacity of effecting one's will on the world. There are strong intersections with the idea of self and society. Kipke (2025) establishes major theoretical links with meaning in life. Although individuality does not represent a meaning-making factor in itself, it seems essential to properly study it. This topic does not receive enough attention in philosophical literature.

As a major theoretical construct, the notion of individuality plays a central role in anthropology and its epistemological history which includes a wide range of orientations and influences. Eller (1988) placed the Herderian and Boasian traditions at the core of his analysis of anthropological research. The Herderian-Boasian inclinations challenged the dominance of evolutionism (Kyslan 2024). From this perspective, the notion of individuality had an instrumental role in the transition from biological considerations to cultural insights. Even today this intricate notion remains at the crossroad of numerous disciplines. For instance, individuality is a major research topic in biological literature (Kranke 2024).

According to Giladi (2017), the notion of individuality has an instrumental function in Western philosophy. Major intellectuals, such as Hegel and Adorno, brought an essential contribution to the development of this intricate theoretical construct. Often dismissed or misunderstood, the Herderian idea of individuality acquired a powerful configuration that determined the scientific and cultural representations of human beings and their environments. Throughout history, the spirit of Herder's style entered many new routes. More particularly, it determined the fundamental values of contemporary American anthropology. Herder's influence on Franz Boas raises many deep historical and epistemological questions. The fact that there are tight connections between Boas and Herder is widely accepted in the academic community (Davis 2008, Bräunlein 2014, Scupin 2019). However, these links lack proper examination and subsequently lose their configurational meanings. It seems essential to emphasise that Boas not only inherited the Herderian philosophical dilemmas but also transformed them within empirical science.

Inspired by Herder, Boas promoted the idea of equality of cultures. He and his followers rejected cultural hierarchisations and developed a distinctive anthropological tradition (Kyslan 2024). Most of the times, great intellectual endeavours assume contradictory configurations. This fate did not weaken Boasian anthropology but rather acted as a strengthening factor. Numerous authors have recently drawn attention to major contradictions within Boas's oeuvre (Porr 2023). By nature extremely controversial, the concept of individuality occupies a central place in American science. Unfortunately, academic literature tends to classify it as a merely normative commitment. Its association with ethical pluralism or cultural relativism translates important features of Boasian anthropology but does not fully display the epistemic significance behind this construction.

Methodology

According to Zheng (2021), historical epistemology can be useful to examine the contextual conditions that gave rise to the current rationalisations of the studied concepts. The historical and epistemological perspectives grant the researcher a wide latitude to apply both concept-focused and method-oriented approaches. This methodological choice improves the understanding of conceptual change in the human sciences. Developed by eminent scholars, such as Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, François Dagoguet and Lorraine Daston, historical epistemology examines academic concepts and methods as historically constructed practices of knowledge.

In the contemporary era of simultaneous cultural homogenisation and fragmentation, the idea of individuality needs to be analysed from an interdisciplinary perspective. Interestingly, Franz Boas admitted that knowledge institutions and mechanism "might seem to encroach too much upon the individuality of each society" (Boas 1902, 807). Historical epistemology has the potential to trace these subtle yet powerful conceptual shifts. Boas himself was aware of the importance of apparently insignificant mutations. "The history of the progress of science yields example after example of the power of resistance belonging to old ideas, even after increasing knowledge of the world has undermined the ground on which they were erected" (Boas 1938, 250). As an interdisciplinary methodology, historical epistemology shows how specific conceptual commitments determine the criteria for valid anthropological evidence. In other words, concepts are not simple descriptive tools. They organise knowledge and research initiatives by determining the object of study, by shaping explanations and by delimiting generalisations. As a matter of fact, there are tight connections between historical epistemology and constructivism (Riezniak 2025). Since Boasian anthropology does not apply only purely theoretical abstractions, the analysis of its context becomes a priority. Historical epistemology opens a new critical perspective of the history and philosophy of science through the examination of major intellectual positions. By using this methodological tool, scholars become equipped to recover, detect and contrast often overlooked essential contingencies that inform and sometimes distort the most influential trends in philosophy (Burnett 2025).

The application of the chosen method involved three key steps. First, the Boasian concept of individuality was situated within the intellectual movements of its time, such as evolutionism and diffusionism. Second, the epistemological analysis established links between the notions of culture and individuality. Third, historical epistemology depicted the operational role of individuality in Boas's *oeuvre*. The present study puts a special emphasis on the book *The Mind of Primitive Man*. However, other major monographs and academic articles were also analysed. By focusing on the intersection between theoretical concepts and scientific practices, historical epistemology reveals both the diversity and the coherence of the methodological approaches developed by Boas and his students. This work combines comprehensive textual analysis with intellectual and historical interpretations to provide a nuanced reconstruction of the Boasian epistemic schemes.

Analysis

Instead of building a simple overlook of American anthropology and its concept of individuality, this analysis illustrates how Boas reorganised the conditions of knowledge production. His intellectual formation was marked by a wide range of thinkers, including the father of the plural concept of culture. Boas was inspired by Herder's thesis of cultural pluralism and relativism according to which each culture has a unique contribution for humanity (Thomas 2025). In Boasian anthropology, individuality represents much more than a normative or relativistic value. Through an in-depth analysis of prominent texts, including *The Mind of Primitive Man* and *Anthropology and Modern Life*, the present study showcases the operationalisation of individuality in the restructuring of anthropological knowledge. These two books exemplify a smooth transition from racial to cultural determinism in which psychological elements play a determinant role. Other academic articles and books from Boas's *oeuvre* were also included in the current study. In fact, Boas often assembled his most popular monographs from distinct fragments of other publications (Porr 2023).

Boas (1938) attempted to analyse "our tendency to evaluate an individual according to the picture that we form of the class to which we assign him" (272). The critique of universal history played an essential role on Boas's notion of individuality. This critique emerged in German philosophy during the late eighteenth century and denied linear historical schemes. By refusing to apply universal laws or abstract generalisations, Boas reinforced the epistemic significance of individuality. His German training planted in him the idea of irreducibility of historical individualities. Boas argued for the equality between "primitive" and "civilised" cultures by pointing out our lack of perplexity about evidently unfamiliar cultural phenomena. Following an implicitly Herderian tone, he often manifested his disillusionment with modernity and its values. Like Herder, Boas rejected rationalist and universalist premises to affirm the equality and authenticity of cultures (Kyslan 2024). The emphasis on the contextual nature of cultural meanings reoriented the epistemic frameworks of Boas's formation in history, geography and philosophy. It seems worth mentioning that the originality of Boasian anthropology does not consist in replicating German philosophical models. What Boas did was to transform them into methodological principles suited to empirical studies.

From Evolutionism to Diffusionism and Historical Particularism

According to Eller (1988), Franz Boas saw anthropology as an indispensable contributor to scientific, social and political debates. His sociocultural analyses questioned the notion of race and fiercely criticised the idea of unilinear evolution. Instead of searching for general laws, he put emphasis on historical particularism. Traditional framed as a reaction against evolutionism, his redefinition of culture achieved a new level of epistemic robustness. Boas used the notion of individuality as a tool against evolutionist stages and hierarchies. In his hands, individuality became not only a value but also a powerful epistemic veto. By dismissing evolutionary explanations and universal laws, Boas re-conceptualised cultures as historically distinctive formations. It should be pointed out that he developed most of his work in a complex scientific, social and political environment with a numerous incoherencies and conflicts (Porr 2023). Often going against his personal and professional interests, Boas paid great personal and professional costs for faithfully following his beliefs (Lewis 2002).

The book *The Mind of Primitive Man* represented a key weapon in the fight against evolutionism. This ambitious and courageous work rejects the idea of unilinear evolution, racial determinism and universal psychological stage. "The claim that achievement and aptitude go hand in hand is not convincing. It must be subjected to an exhaustive analysis (Boas 1938, 10). The application of the notion of individuality limited extravagant explanatory narratives by examining the conditions of knowledge production and the premises of cultural analysis. In *The Mind of Primitive Man*, Boas did not question the division of humanity into races. What he did was to put under deep scrutiny all criteria for this division. He insisted that biological, linguistic and cultural categories cannot be applied interchangeably. By laying the basis for diffusionism, Boas argued for the vital importance of rituals and habits. It seems worth mentioning that the diffusionist definition of culture closely matches with the Herderian paradigm. The diffusionists paid great attention not only to conscious activities but also to unconscious processes. Through a romantic vision of culture, anthropologists reformulated the study of cultural practices and social habits (Kyslan 2024).

In addition to openly criticising racist ideas in anthropological research, Boas supported African American students and activists. As an engaged public intellectual, he was against all forms of totalising or essentialist approaches (Porr 2023). Boas not only challenged the validity of discriminatory policies but also replaced them with other alternatives resulting from a more liberal political agenda. He and his followers publicly denounced discriminatory practices. The colonial past of the United States and the large number of immigrants in American society stimulated new scientific endeavours because the differences between cultures needed to be carefully analysed and explained (Greenfield 2001). From the beginning, Boas's critique of evolutionary anthropology had its epistemic foundations on the idea of individuality. *The Mind of Primitive Man* can be seen as epistemological manifest. "Both, new approaches to truth, and a more systematic development of knowledge represent a gain" (Boas 1938, 202). In this book, Boas critically questions the unilinear models of cultural evolutionism by pointing at the scientific illegitimacy of its generalisations. Since cultures do not pass through the same developmental stages, similar cultural traits may result from a wide range of historical conditions. "The validity of the general sameness of the evolution of mankind is based on the assumption that the same cultural features must always have developed from the same, single causes" (Boas 1938, 184). The explanatory failure of evolutionary classifications stresses the need for historical reconstructions. Instead of denying the importance of anthropological comparisons, Boas redefined the conditions for their application. The main condition became the generation of historically grounded explanations. Read in this light, similarities are not proof of identical evolutionary stages or origins. The emphasis on individual cultural contexts significantly weakened the dominance of deterministic models. Without abolishing anthropological comparisons, Boas used the epistemic principle of individuality to methodologically constrain their scope.

The Boasian Concept of Culture

"Franz Boas, perhaps the first professional modern anthropologist, both followed previous intellectual trends and set new ones" (Eller 1988, 4). Generally speaking, the concept of culture was "imported via Franz Boas from German Romanticism" (Hodges 2012, 40). Cultural transfers have a powerful and pervasive influence. As a matter of fact, Herder's concept of culture played an essential role in the creation of not only German but also British and American anthropologies (Kyslan 2024).

Franz Boas brought a fresh breath to anthropological research. Edward Sapir, Alfred Kroeber and Margaret Mead reproduced numerous postulates that their teacher established. Before Boas, most intellectuals conceptualised biology and race as the main determinants of human behaviour. Eugenic models contaminated many disciplines with theoretically weak statements on the alleged links between race and psychological structures

(Scupin 2018). To question these tendencies, Boas used the notion of individuality. "The range of individual differences that occur within a race has never been investigated in a satisfactory manner" (Boas 1938, 196).

The Boasian concept of culture mirrors an innovative mix of individualistic and collective orientations. "Culture may be defined as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually" (Boas 1938, 159). At early stages of his career, Franz Boas understood that general laws were epistemologically fragile. He was continuously searching for new alternatives. "Between the time of his arrival in the United States and his death in 1942, Boas reoriented American anthropology around a broad, pluralistic, relativistic, and holistic conception of culture" (Gilkeson 2010, 1). The explicit links between Boas's and Herder's plural conceptions do not seem to lose out over time. The recognition of the uniqueness of cultures forms the foundations of the Herderian motive of cultural relativism (Kyslan 2024). Just like Herder, Boas was fascinated by "the development of individuality in nations" (Boas 1928, 103). The article *The History of Anthropology* published by Boas in 1904 is one of the few of his works that includes direct references to Herder. It was in this article that Boas credited Herder with creating the idea of culture (Koerner 1992, Davis 2008). A pertinent question that emerges is the following: Was Boas influenced only by Herder? Gilkeson (2010) notes the connotations of holism, relativism and pluralism were not present in the dominant conceptions of culture. Matthew Arnold's humanistic insights and E. B. Tylor's technical and anthropological definitions did not respond to the complex needs of American anthropology. The German connotations of pluralism and relativism, on the other hand, always had a solid epistemological position. With time, they became extremely popular in the United States. The insistence on the plurality and individuality of cultures reconfigured the entire knowledge base in anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century.

Only through a full and equal participation of all individuals and societal groups will essential insights come to light. The idea of human behaviour as a learned rather than inherently biological phenomenon forms the basis of Boasian anthropology. Little by little, the notion of culture came to denote a specific behaviour that chronically varies from place to place or from group to group. This notion changed the whole course of anthropological research. Boas and his students transformed anthropology into one of the main social sciences. They actively contributed to the development of new study programs and departments as part of an unprecedented growth of universities. An increasing number of scholars joined the battle against racism by building the innovative academic frames of anthropology. The Boasian notion of culture encourages an equal and full participation of individuals in learning practices (Greenfield 2001).

The Boasian Concept of Individual

Individuality represents an essential component of Boasian anthropology. Franz Boas went as far as conceiving the particularity of cultures as a crucial mechanism for social stability. Overall, each society develops a unique set of cultural practices and rituals that individuals use to integrate themselves into social networks and interact with the surrounding world (Kyslan 2024). Boas's individual inherited many characteristics from the Herderian models of culture. American anthropology transformed Herder's notion of *Einführung* into ethnography to fuse the objective demands of mainstream sciences with relativist analyses of cultures and individuals (Edwards 2013). Since "we cannot say what the specific characteristics of any one individual may be" (Boas 1938, 55), subjective differences add another layer of complexity. Boas and his students inspired other scholars around the world to analyse individual and collective behaviours. They stressed the role of individual creativity as a source of cultural change and innovation (Amit and Dyck 2006).

Boas applied the Herderian idea of individuality to improve cultural analyses. In other words, he transformed individuality from an abstract philosophical concept into a rule governing anthropological interpretations and explanations. This intricate construct evolved in a tight connection with German historicism. Individuality progressively emerged as a historical singularity that limits the scope of universal laws. Herder's cultural dynamics imply the process of self-discovery, the construction of identity and the perception of originality. For this reason, Charles Taylor gives a special importance to the romantic idea of authenticity in Herder. From this perspective, human beings have an impressive power to create images and incorporate them into the symbolic texture of different cultures. The interaction of different forces generates new cultural expressions through the development of cosmopolitan worldviews. Instead of promoting nationalistic values, Herder dedicated his plural notion of culture to the humanity (Czobor-Lupp 2013). In tune with Herder's views, Boasian anthropology developed a new approach based on a deep understanding of cultural and individual differences. "We may say that the nervous condition of an individual tends to make him stable or unstable, slow to act or of rapid decision, but we can infer this only through his reaction to given cultural conditions" (Boas 1938, 141). For this reason, as

an anthropologist, teacher and activist, Boas supported less formal educational systems, intercultural experiences, critical awareness, independent learning and more academic individuality (Porr 2023).

Individuality vs Cultural Relativism

Boasian cultural relativism includes important political and social components. According to the premises of relativism, each culture is the product of its own history and traditions. Therefore, individual behaviours should be analysed exclusively in terms of the cultural standards prevailing in a determined context. The Boasians conceived human behaviour as a learned repertoire of different components rather than a biological or climatic product. Their ethnographic studies were based on large collections of data (Greenfield 2001). By applying the lens of historical particularism, Boas was able to conceive cultures as distinctive historical formations without establishing hierarchies. Despite its great academic importance, Boasian cultural relativism contains many unsolved tensions (Porr 2023). It seems important to state that the concept of individuality and the idea of relativism are related but do not represent the same construct.

Cultural relativism has an implicit social dimension, but Boas was not the first scholar to fuse scientific and social approaches. Fashioning scientific theories for the purpose of achieving specific socio-political goals has always been a common practice. By the twentieth century, many scholars started to chase the artificial and unrealistic vision of a "pure science". Fortunately, Boas did not follow this trend (Greenfield 2001). Scientific practices depend on a wide array of social, political and even emotional factors. The implicit Herderian legacy can be found in the conceptualisation of culture and in the use of individuality as a powerful epistemic operator. Herder believed that feelings and imagination have the potential to connect individuals across nations by enlarging their cosmopolitan capacities and their affective solidarity. He aimed to attach different cultures and languages to each other. The plural interpretations of the meanings of humanity across different cultural contexts became an essential philosophical instrument. Herder gave a special importance to the human imaginative power and the representations of culture as an irreplaceable part of global narratives of humanity. The cultivation of cultural skills assumes a vital function. By encouraging cross-cultural understandings and by recognising the locality of our own values, we become open to meaningful learning. Herder argued for the plurality of humankind and its deep psychological networks. He conceived humanity as a cultural and historical construction (Czobor-Lupp 2013). His semantic legacy in culture determined the development of social sciences and influenced the emergence of Boasian anthropology through historical particularism and cultural relativism (Kyslan 2024).

Boas described and analysed cultures according to their internal development rather than to external classificatory schemes. "A knowledge of the categories under which in various cultures experience is classified will, therefore, help to an understanding of early psychological processes" (Boas 1938, 209). Inspired by the models of German historicism, Boas converted a philosophical critique of universal history into a methodological principle of empirical research. The Herderian-Boasian notion of culture as heritage allowed the penetration of past into present. Scholars became more aware of the great influence of tradition and history on individual behaviour (Kyslan 2024). The epistemic role of the notion of individuality in American anthropology should be distinguished from cultural relativism. While the premises of relativism imply the idea that the validity of knowledge depends on its cultural frames, Boas and his construction of individuality redefined objectivity without undermining it. He applied this notion at multiple levels, from the rejection of racial typologies to the conduction of linguistic and cultural analyses where grammatical structures or customs received a historically sensitive and holistic consideration. "The historic view contains a strong, esthetic element, which finds its satisfaction in the clear conception of the individual event" (Boas 1904, 516). From an epistemological perspective, individuality restructures the realm of anthropological knowledge and delimitates the possibilities of acceptable explanations through historically situated accounts. Largely surpassing its descriptive proprieties, this complex philosophical notion flourished into a lively rule of scientific practice.

Individuality as Method

After his field trips to Baffin Island, Boas developed a great respect and admiration for the Inuit people by participating in their everyday lives. He became aware of the limited knowledge that the academic community had on indigenous populations. The study of these cultures resulted in a critical examination of evolutionary theories and rigid categories. Boas actively fostered the importance of ethnographic studies and advocated the freedom to participate in cultural dynamics (Greenfield 2001). "Ever since the time when the study of human cultures was recognized as a problem, attempts have been made to interpret it as a unit phenomenon even before anything like a fair amount of material had been collected" (Boas 1938, 175). One of the main components of Boasian

methodological approaches is intensive fieldwork and linguistics. Based on a solid ethnographic particularism, the father of American anthropology promoted case-based reasoning and skilfully used the idea of individuality to structure the process of knowledge production. For instance, his groundbreaking studies on bodily types of European immigrants in the United States empirically proved the instability of racial classifications (Porr 2023).

Boasian anthropology echoes the interdisciplinary alliances advanced by German intellectuals. For instance, Herder argued that sciences, more particularly literature, history and rhetoric, develop our feeling of humanity. Herder's philosophical anthropology brought a meaningful contribution to the understanding of cultural pluralism. His conception of imagination emerges as a creative act of storytelling and story-sharing that accentuates the intersubjective nature of identity (Czobor-Lupp 2013). By combining a deistically oriented romanticism with empiricism, he had a long-standing impact on Western intellectual history and irreversibly changed the study of culture (Niezen 2009). Herderian philosophical anthropology inspired not only the development of cultural relativism but also the American concept of culture. Boas transformed Herder's philosophical insights into methodological principles of empirical research. In his rich empirical studies, he aimed to understand "the individuality of each region" (Boas 1938, 171). While in Herderian anthropology, individuality functioned as an epistemic operator, Boas employed it as a general principle for structuring research methods.

The intellectual debt to Herder's historicist concept of culture explains the Boasian epistemic commitment in contextualist interpretations. Just like Herder who started the tradition of collecting folktales and songs, Boas used the same units to formulate his studies. "A perusal of the available collections makes it quite clear that in this sense the expression of the cultural life of the people contained in their tales gives to them a marked individuality" (Boas 1940, 493). Scepticism about universal laws and the innovative idea of linguistic centrality reduces the distance between these two scholars from different historical periods. In his fieldworks, Boas effectively operationalised the Herderian arguments about historicism and cultural particularity. His comparative studies became historically grounded. In fact, he applied the principle of cultural and historical individuality to limit the scope of generalisations in anthropology. "The new historical view also came into conflict with the generalizing method of science. It was imposed upon that older view of nature in which the discovery of general laws was considered the ultimate aim of investigation" (Boas 1904, 515).

For centuries, scholars have accumulated large amounts of information describing different cultural phenomena. This growing body of knowledge needed deep analyses and coherent explanations. Since the implementation of new approaches became urgent, Boas replaced the dominant evolutionary and ethnocentric theories with his humanistic and individualistic models. From this perspective, humanity is a diverse formation of morally equivalent cultural groups. Boas was not a multiculturalist and did not openly support identity politics. However, he recognised and studied small-scale cultural phenomena and local cultures (Greenfield 2001). The book *Race, Language and Culture* illustrates well the methodological implications of the notion of individuality. "For each individual case we can arrive at an understanding of its determination by inner and outer forces, but we cannot explain its individuality in the form of laws" (Boas 1940, 274). Cultural phenomena emerge as autonomous and historically contingent realities with their own conditions of scientific intelligibility. Through intensive ethnographic fieldworks and exhaustive linguistic studies, Boas accumulated a large amount of scientific data to generate a legitimate basis for anthropological knowledge and to justify his methodological principle of individuality. He successfully deconstructed concepts such as race and nation through scientific and political narratives (Eller 1988). His fieldwork on indigenous populations accentuated a strong conviction of the uniqueness and diversity of cultures (Kyslan 2024). The vast academic portfolio, developed by Boas, shows how individuality emerges as a major guiding vector for empirical observations, comparative analyses, complex data collection and interdisciplinary fieldwork.

The methodological consequences of the epistemic notion of individuality can be found in Boasian historical particularism. His cautious comparisons took into consideration a wide range of biological, linguistic, cultural and historical dimensions to form solid interdisciplinary alliances. "The student of the history of philosophy is well aware how strongly the mind of the greatest genius is influenced by the current thought of his time" (Boas 1938, 136). In this light, culture does not represent a law-governed construction but a historically conditioned dynamic process. Even the teaching methods of anthropology, Boas (1919) left up to "the individuality of the instructor and to the availability of material" (45). Undoubtedly, the individuality of students and instructors deserves a special attention. Throughout his long career, Boas diligently followed this principle. He had a very humble pedagogical approach towards his faithful academic team. Jacknis (2002) notes that Boas respected the individuality of each student. As it is possible to observe, the notion of individuality makes the core of Boasian

anthropology, its intricate conceptual frameworks, its diverse methods and its mechanisms of knowledge transmission.

Individuality: Epistemic Break or Transformation?

According to Boas, the value of science and the application of knowledge improve the human condition through individual self-improvement and social advancement. Each person should have the freedom to fully and equally participate in cultural dynamics and learning processes. Boas defied scientific categories by insisting on the importance of individuality. He was actually able to produce a very balanced approach. On one hand, human behaviour is not determined solely by culture. On the other hand, studies based on ethnocentric worldviews or exclusively biological research do not provide the necessary data on cultural variation. America's entry into Second World War shifted the priorities of academic, social and political debates. To achieve a maximum level of internal cooperation, to reduce the influence of separatist ideologies and to boost the war effort, the population needed to be unified by shared values and goals. For this reason, the new liberal philosophy put a special of emphasis on citizens as individuals (Greenfield 2001).

Boas had a massive effect on anthropology, both institutionally and epistemologically (Porr 2023). There was a reformulation of anthropological research by providing a new metaphor of humanity in which "culture, the term he used to refer to the total way of life of each population, became in a sense like the individuals Boas so greatly admired, each unique and distinctive with its own practices, values and worth" (Greenfield 2001, 43). In the light of the central importance of individuality in American academia, the key question that emerges is the following: is it an epistemic break or a logical transformation? Of courses, Boas distanced himself from the universalism of the Enlightenment. At the same, he did not follow the exact path of other philosophers. There was a veritable epistemic transformation. His commitment to scientific rigour dictated the rejection of excessive generalisations. "We have pointed out before that knowledge alone does not constitute richness of culture, but that the coordination of knowledge determines our judgment" (Boas 1938, 205). While actively applying the Herderian conception of individuality, Boas took it the next level by firmly integrating it into anthropological methodological processes. In other words, the idea of individuality came to shape the production of scientific evidence and the norms of explanation or classification. For instance, in his analyses of the stylistic aspects of primitive literature, Boas (1925) argued that "the raven tales of Siberia and Alaska are on the whole connected only by the individuality of the raven and by his voracity" (338). The example of folktales captures the power of cultural representations. This may seem obvious now, but there happened a major change in thinking. It was Herder who transformed anthropology from a study of anatomy to a study of culture. He played an instrumental role in the shift of the concept of culture from biological determinants to empirical-ethnographic variables. Research in anthropological sciences started to include the notions of soul, body, language, art, history, nation and politics (Kyslan 2024).

The concept of individuality unleashes powerful images that touch the idea of meaning of life (Kipke 2025). According to Herder, in contrast to animals, human beings create themselves and their own worlds. Through language, individuals are able to understand their inner selves and their social interactions. The diversity of experiences functions as a catalyst for linguistic creativity. The power to generate images, representations or symbols is in fact the power to transform oneself. Human beings interact with each other and share these images in order to create a collective sense of sympathy and solidarity. As a consequence, reflective imagination becomes a veritable social, cultural, political and philosophical instrument in Herder's models. While vivid sensations and motions engage human beings in an active interaction with the surrounding world, imagination provides the creative force for learning and transformation processes. Put simply, imagination makes us receptive, creative, flexible and adaptable (Czobor-Lupp 2013). The notions of imagination and individuality are in fact inseparable. The Boasians religiously followed this premise. Boas (1914) wrote that "the individuality of each folkloristic area is such, that we must count the imaginative productiveness of each tribe as an important element in the development of the present situation" (404).

Boas continued and improved the Herderian vision. He used individuality as a negative epistemic operator that constraints excessive generalisations. "Freedom of judgment can be attained only when we learn to estimate an individual according to his own ability and character" (Boas 1938, 272). Individuality became much more than an abstract value or a theoretical component of relativism. Methodologically speaking, it affected anthropological comparisons, casual explanations and scientific classifications. "A serious objection to the reasoning of those who try to establish lines of evolution of cultures lies in the frequent lack of comparability of the data with which we are dealing" (Boas 1938, 186). The transformation from philosophy to method was fluid. Boasian anthropology

operationalised the epistemic notion of individuality to limit immoderate explanatory ambitions while enabling a sustainable historical intelligibility.

Conclusions

The present study improves the understanding of the epistemological foundations of contemporary anthropology. The analysis shows that Franz Boas solidified the central position of the notion of individuality as a major epistemic operator and made it part of his signature style. American anthropology became a field of innovative research on human diversity. Herder's concept of culture and fervent desire to understand other nations theoretically determined the emergence of Boasian thought (Kyslan 2024). From Herder, the father of American anthropology inherited not only a solid conception of culture but also a powerful epistemic principle. In Boasian theory, individuality surpassed its status of cultural value or relativistic mechanism. Boas transformed it into a reliable principle that limits the scope of excessively broad anthropological generalisations, comparisons and explanations. "The phenomena of our science are so individualized, so exposed to outer accident that no set of laws could explain them" (Boas 1940, 274). Individuality shifts from a theoretical construct in Herder's philosophical anthropology to an interdisciplinary methodological frame in Boasian cultural anthropology.

"Boas was neither a great innovator nor an original thinker. However, he was a brilliant implementer who brought to America the German traditions of idealist philosophy, particularist ethnography, and professional education – the main principles of Herder's philosophy" (Kyslan 2024, 12). By demonstrating that the concept of individuality can operate as an analytical tool and as a major mechanism for knowledge production, this study illuminates broader issues in human sciences. Boas's vision of anthropology as a public space for free speech, critical inquiry, diversity of ways of life and richness of cultural expressions (Porr 2023) was crystallised in a new conceptual and methodological model. Boas did not simply inherit Herder's philosophical anthropology. He operationalised it by undertaking a dynamic epistemic reconfiguration. While reducing the role of teleology and theoretical speculations, he reinforced the importance of empirical data, fieldwork and linguistics. The epistemic principle of individuality restructured the methods, comparisons and explanations of Boasian anthropology. By converting German philosophical constructs of historical particularism into a methodological tool, Boas redefined the conditions for the scientific description and interpretation of cultural phenomena. The present work expands our understanding of his legacy beyond the conventional views on cultural pluralism and relativism. Read from the perspective of historical epistemology, individuality comes up as a central epistemic operator of contemporary anthropology that materialises the power of conceptual dynamics on scientific practices and explanatory efforts.

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BIONOTE:

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