

## RECENSIONI

---

**Han F. VERMEULEN** | *Before Boas: The genesis of ethnography and ethnology in the German enlightenment*, Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press, 2015, pp. xxvi-718.

The title and subtitle of this book predispose to reflection. Taken as a whole, they contain two centres of reference. First is the name of (Franz) Boas, a figure who marked decisively the “professionalization” of anthropology on the North American continent. Indeed, as Regna Darnell, the author of the quoted term, pointed out<sup>1</sup>, Boas introduced in the anthropological domain a new theoretical and methodological orientation. Moreover, he induced coherence to the networks of relationships among practitioners as well as institutions at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup>. Historically and epistemologically, the impact of the whole Boasian work found its expression in the autonomization of anthropology as a scientific discipline.

The second centre of reference I have in view is the syntagm “ethnography and ethnology”. In the present limited context, let us ignore the possible differences between the two terms. In any case, along the time this terminological couple underwent significant meaning changes. Until the middle of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the two terms (either separately or together) were invested with a disciplinary meaning: in accordance with etymology, their identity was designated as the science of human races, or, more completely, the science of peoples and their cultures. Later on Claude Lévi-Strauss established that:

---

1. See Regna Darnell, *The Professionalization of American Anthropology: A Case Study in the Sociology of Knowledge*, *Social Science Information*, 10, 2, 1971: 83-103; Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing 1998.



Ethnography, ethnology and anthropology are not three different disciplines, or three different conceptions about the same studies. As a matter of fact, they are three stages or three moments of the same research, and the preference for one or another of these terms expresses only the prevailing attention for a type of research that could never be exclusive towards the others (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon 2005 [1958], p. 413, my translation)

Since then ethnography (especially) counts – and this is the second (let us call it structural) of its meanings – as the empirical phase of an anthropological research. Now, by taking a good look at the title and subtitle of the present book, we can read there another – the third – meaning: if Boas and his work embodied the professionalization of anthropology, then ethnography & ethnology as practised before him stand for prehistory of anthropology. This could be an adequate key for understanding the book at stake.

*Before Boas* has not appeared as a *deus ex machina*; it has behind a long own story. At the EASA Conference in Prague (28<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> August 1992), Han Vermeulen, along with Arturo Alvarez Roldán, organized a workshop dedicated to the history of anthropology in Europe. Vermeulen contributed to the resulted volume – edited by the two convenors – with a substantial study<sup>2</sup>, in which the author left opened his predisposition to continue the investigations. He kept the promise (made first of all to himself), and *Before Boas* is, over the time, the rewarding fruit of his passion, perseverance, and mobility in following a high intellectual project.

The book is from the outset impressive by its dimensions. The total quantity of pages (747) is distributed as follows: preliminary mentions xxvi, the text as such 458, notes 55, references 174. When having under your eyes such a massive tome (extremely rich in concrete data), it is difficult to detect the main force lines of the whole text. Nevertheless, one of the focal idea of the book – anticipated but not clearly expressed in author's chapter of 1995 – is that:

Ethnography in colonial Russia flowered early and abundantly, to such an extent that the institutionalization of the discipline in Russia occurred much earlier than in Western Europe or the USA (Vermeulen – an idea of 1999, quoted in Vermeulen 2015; cfr. *Before Boas*, p. 203).

This apparently surprising state of things is explained by the activity that some German scholars (Daniel Gottlieb Messerschmidt, Gerhard Friedrich

---

2. Han F. Vermeulen, Origins and Institutionalization of Ethnography and Ethnology in Europe and USA, 1771–1845, in *Fieldwork and Footnotes. Studies in the History of European Anthropology*, Han F. Vermeulen, Arturo Alvarez Roldán, eds, London & New York, Routledge 1995: 39–59.

Müller, Johann Georg Gmelin, Georg Wilhelm Steller, etc.) developed in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century in the Russian empire, especially in Siberia, Caucasus, and Volga area. Their research experiences were then reevaluated in the academic centres of Göttingen and Vienna (p. 202).

Another subtle observation of the author regards the existence in the same XVIII<sup>th</sup> century of an alternative trend to the travel accounts.

This type of ethnographic research was more narrowly focused and involved fewer participants, preferring the scholar's private study rather than travel. Historians like Müller, Schlözer, Gatterer, and Kollár forged an academic field that was taken up by nineteenth-century scholars like Carl Ritter, Gustav Klemm, Theodor Waitz, Adolf Bastian, Lewis Henry Morgan, Friedrich Ratzel, E. B. Tylor, Franz Boas, and many others (p. 270).

Among such scholars who devoted themselves to the study of ethnographic themes in the intimacy of libraries and archives must be included also Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723). Voivode of Moldavia for a short time (1710-1711), writer, philosopher, musician, historian (quoted and praised by Leibniz, Voltaire, Montesquieu), Cantemir is *de facto* the author of the first ethnographic monograph for which there is no model in the Europe of that time. Written in Latin as a work of reception in the Academy of Berlin, *Descriptio Moldaviae* [The Description of Moldavia] (1716) satisfies all the modern exigencies of both ethnographic and monographic work. The only "fault" (to say so) of its author was that of not making use of these technical terms ("ethnography" and "monograph") which had not been still invented. Otherwise, some of his historical writings were translated into English, French, and German. Even *Descriptio Moldaviae* benefitted from a German edition (1771); and, notably, the *Vorrede* [Preface] to this edition was signed just by Gerhard Friedrich Müller, to whom Han Vermeulen has reserved a consistent chapter (pp. 131–218) in *Before Boas* as one of those German scholars consecrated as forerunners of ethnography in Europe! Obviously, Dimitrie Cantemir was atypical among his contemporaries (he did not deal with Siberia or other Russian regions, and, furthermore, his learned concerns went beyond the scientific goals – towards philosophy and arts), but he deserves to be remembered among the honourable promoters of "proto-ethnography" (to use a term adopted also by Vermeulen).

Recently printed, *Before Boas* will grow in importance with the elapsing of time. Certainly, it will become soon a landmark (if it has not become yet) and will definitively consecrate Han F. Vermeulen as a prominent specialist in this fascinating academic field, which is history of ethnography and ethnology. The richness of accumulated information makes this book to be in itself an exceptional source of information. On a plan somehow parallel with

that of the great expeditions in the past, the author wandered through a multitude of libraries and archives where he read and gathered documentary data for us, too. Therefore, anyone who will need information regarding the emergence and diffusion of such important terms as “ethnography”, “ethnology”, *Volkskunde*, *Völkerkunde*, or “anthropology” – and all kind of correlated subjects – could make appeal with confidence to *Before Boas*.

**Gheorghiță GEANĂ**

University of Bucharest

[gheorghita\\_geana2003@yahoo.com](mailto:gheorghita_geana2003@yahoo.com)