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They blinded me with science: further thoughts on the AAA controversy

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By Eugene Raikhel

A few thoughts regarding the [recent controversy](#) stemming from the AAA executive board's revision of the association's statement of purpose which removed explicit descriptions of anthropology as "science."

First off, I want to make clear that [Jacob Hickman's post](#) on this issue does not necessarily reflect the views of all the contributors to Somatosphere. That should be self-evident, but given that 1) we are a collaborative site, 2) that many of us understand "science" (be it "social," "human," "medical" or "natural") both as an endeavor we are engaged in *and* as an object of study, and 3) that feelings seem to be running high on this issue, I want to emphasize that there may be a wide variety of views on this issue among our contributors.

The issue has already been widely debated, although regrettably often through a number of tired and deeply unproductive oppositions that sound like a rehashing of the 1990s so-called "science wars": "truth," "hard science," and evidence versus "social construction" and "post-modernism" (by this point used almost entirely as an epithet). Daniel Lende has posted [an excellent overview of the controversy](#) at Neuroanthropology, including his own—quite nuanced—take on the debate.

I think that Daniel and Greg's [Neuroanthropology](#) project (as well as other efforts such as [Critical Neuroscience](#), not to mention the work of scholars like [Margaret Lock and Vinh-Kim Nguyen](#)) is important in this regard because rather than pitting cultural and social anthropology as somehow *against* the biological sciences, they see the social study of scientific knowledge as a necessary platform for conversation between the social and biological sciences. In other words, the conceptual tools of cultural anthropology and science studies are not just means of critiquing "scientific" knowledge claims, but also the basis for meaningful engagement.

[Alex Golub makes another subtle and important argument](#) at Savage Minds, pointing out that:

[W]e don't have to go that far afield to recognize forms of

knowledge that are rehabilitated when anthropology jettisons its label as 'science': history, epigraphy, historical linguistics, and the humanities in general. The opposite of 'science' is not 'nihilistic postmodernism' it's 'an enormously huge range of forms of scholarship, many of which are completely and totally committed to accuracy and impartiality in the knowledge claims they make....

Now, someone might argue that historical work that is committed to accuracy, submits its claims to evidence and scholarly scrutiny and so forth is not actually a form of the humanities, but is itself a kind of 'science'. In fact one person has made such an argument: Franz Boas.

Throughout his career — for instance in his classic short piece 'The Study of Geography' — Boas made a distinction between not between the 'natural sciences' and the 'interpretive sciences' but rather between generalizing sciences (which study things that happen over and over again, like gravity) and the 'historical sciences' (which study things which happen just once in history, like the Battle of Hastings)... Thus for Boas something could be 'scientific' even if it did not ape the manners of a chemist in his lab.

I think that this point is terribly important and we'd do well to pay attention to Boas's distinction, as one that is potentially much more productive than the usual suspects. This is how Boas frames the distinction in ['The Study of Geography'](#) (published in *Science!*):

"Naturalists [read: those practicing the generalizing sciences] will not deny the importance of every phenomenon, but will not consider it worthy of study for its own sake. It is only a proof or a resutation of their laws, systems, and hypotheses (as they are deduced from true phenomena), which they feel obliged to bring as near the truth as possible. The deductions, however, are their main interest; and the reward of the indefatigable student is to review, from the summit of his most general deductions, the vast field of phenomena. Joyfully he sees that every process and every phenomenon which seem to the stranger an irregular and incomprehensible conglomerate is a link of a long chain. Losing sight of the single facts, he sees only the beautiful order of the world.

The cosmographer [read: one practicing the historical sciences], on the other hand, holds to the phenomenon which is the object of his study, may it occupy a high or low rank in the system of physical sciences, and lovingly tries to penetrate into its secrets until every feature is plain and clear. This occupation with the object of his affection affords him a delight not inferior to that which the physicist enjoys in his systematical arrangement of the world," ([Boas 1887: 139-140](#)).

In the current debate, I think that there is some — at least rhetorical — agreement on the idea that the AAA's statement of purpose should make room for both of these varieties of knowledge production, whether or not we call them both "science." Where I particularly sympathize with concerns such as those raised in [Jacob's post](#) is in regard to wider perceptions of what it is that anthropologists do — particularly among those who make decisions regarding funding. It is not hard to imagine the junior congressman or congresswoman who, during the drafting of a federal budget in the near future, will make a call for eliminating the NSF's cultural anthropology program on the basis that anthropologists don't consider their research to be "science." [Similar arguments](#) get rolled out almost every time research budgets pass through the legislature, and while they may not necessarily have their intended effects, do we really want to provide them with more ammunition? Perhaps, whether or not we identify ourselves as scientists, we can agree on that?

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