

# Life–affirming *versus* Life–denying Cultures : Ruth Benedict and Social Synergy

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## Early Years

Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) grew up in New York City where she was graduated from Vassar College in 1909. Upon graduation, she sought a profession, moving about for a time. She travelled to Europe where she lived for a year. On return to the US she settled in California, teaching in girls' schools until 1914 when she returned to New York City and married Stanley Benedict, a biochemist. Sadly, for five years they tried to have children but were unable to do so. She spent her time creatively by writing poetry and studying dance as well as biographies of famous women. She wrote poetry under the pseudonym Anne Singleton until the 1930s. In 1919 she enrolled at the New School for Social Research. She came under the influence of the anthropologists Elsie Clews Parsons and Alexander Goldenweiser, students of Franz Boas. They encouraged her to attend Columbia and study with Franz Boas, a suggestion she embraced. Benedict was a keen humanist and brought this perspective to anthropology.

## Benedict's Perspective

She received her Ph.D. in 1923. Her thesis was on *The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America* (1923). In 1924 she began teaching at Columbia. Two of her outstanding students were Marvin Opler and Margaret Mead. She began to lay the groundwork for her overall view of culture in her early fieldwork. Benedict was a configurationalist, conceiving of cultures as total constructs, including religious, and aesthetic elements. Benedict's first book, *Tales of the Cochiti Indians* (1931), and her two-volume *Zuni Mythology* (1935) were based on intensive

fieldwork over 11 years, mainly among the Pueblo, Apache, Blackfoot and Serrano peoples. *Patterns of Culture* (1934), was Benedict's major contribution to anthropology. It compares Zuni, Dobu, and Kwakiutl cultures. Benedict demonstrated that each culture selects only a small number of elements from the vast possibilities available. These configurations amount to the personality of the culture. For the remainder of her career Benedict continued to develop this approach. Additionally, her interest in folklore led to her editing the *Journal of American Folklore* from 1925-1940.

## World War II

With the coming of World War II Benedict went on to write *Race: Science and Politics*, refuting racist theory. This book became quite controversial as did the movie based on it. The onset of World War II left Boasians in a quandary. There was a belief that anthropology had significant lessons to teach about being human and the plasticity of so-called human nature. There was also a strong stricture against generalizations, or at least generalizations at that time. However, although opposed to overgeneralization, Boasians did feel that there was a need to go beyond mere statements of specifics that bordered on exoticism. Alfred Kroeber, for example, wrote a textbook, *Anthropology* (1948), outlining the general ideas of the field. In private, moreover, Kroeber poked fun at Boas's opposition to general laws. Alternatively, culture and personality studies were in conformity with many of Boas's ideas.

Benedict became a special adviser to the Office of War Information in 1943-1945. She dedicated her expertise toward studying the peoples of occupied territories and enemy lands. Benedict extended her interest in Japan during this time, resulting in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). After the war Benedict went back to Columbia in 1946. In 1947 she became the president of the American Anthropological Association. Demonstrating the chauvinism of anthropology at the time, Benedict finally became full Professor at Columbia in 1948. However, she was not elected the Chair of the Anthropology Department, although Franz Boas had made it clear before his death that he wanted her to succeed him. Nevertheless, despite her disappointment, she began what would have been her most comprehensive research as director of a study of contemporary European and cultures, the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures (France, Syria, China, Russia, Eastern European Jews, Czechoslovakia). There were 120 scholars from 14 disciplines and 16 nationalities involved in the program. However, she died soon after.

Consequently, Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist who had helped pioneer the concept of cultural relativism, found herself with a major dilemma when faced with the inhumanity, intolerance, and brutality of Nazi Germany. She could not blithely state that Hitler's system was equal with others and needed to be judged simply on its own terms. Cleverly, she adapted the concept of synergy from the physical sciences and applied it to human cultural systems, under the term 'social synergy'. Through diligent cross-cultural controlled comparison of a number of societies, she noted that societies, which promote non-aggression foster a cultural climate in which the individual acts to serve both the group's well-being and his or her own. This fact does not mean that Zuni, for example, are somehow

more unselfish than say Ojibwa or Kwakiutl or nicer people in themselves. It means that their cultural patterns promote what she termed synergy. She noted that societies have low synergy or high synergy. Moreover, those societies with high social synergy are not either more or less 'evolved' in technological terms. Nor are those with low social synergy. Examples of high and low synergy are found at every level of technological development from hunters and gatherers to industrial society. What is true, nevertheless, is that low synergy is correlated with aggression and high synergy is correlated with more peaceful conflict resolution and personal fulfillment. (Cf. Maslow and Honigman 1970, and Mc Elroy 1985.)

Abraham Maslow, a good friend of Benedict, was working along the same lines. His concept of self-actualization paralleled Benedict's social synergy. He borrowed part of her manuscript on synergy and with John Honigman, a cultural anthropologist, published the notes and expanded on them. With the concept of social synergy Benedict drew attention to life-affirming versus life-denying cultures. The concept has echoes of Edward Sapir's idea of genuine as opposed to spurious cultures. Genuine cultures are those which promote the needs and personal fulfillments of individuals. Grindal (1976) draws out the clear connection between genuine culture and synergy. He begins with Sapir's genuine culture and he asserts it comes to its full fruition in Benedict's concept of synergy. Benedict framed her idea in this manner, 'any society that is compatible with human advancements is a good one, but a society that works against basic human goals is antihuman and evil and can be judged as such.' Clearly, Benedict saw Nazi Germany as the embodiment of evil itself. This idea, patently, fits into Maslow's idea that self-actualization should emerge through the person's dialogue with community but does not solve the problem of who gets to judge what is life-affirming or denying and when. Simply, she was seeking to discover the cultural and social roots for aggression, including warfare, and the way the culture and social structure can shape individual constitutions in differing ways. The consistency of her argument is brought home through subtle arguments in each topic. In moving to the general level, she does not lose the enormous value of understanding the specific cultures she discusses. In my opinion, she unites cultural relativity and sound generalization in the same work, demonstrating the need for both perspectives in a full anthropological view.

It is also important to note the importance on Benedict's thinking of the writing of her book *Race: Science and Politics* in 1940. She drew heavily on the work of Franz Boas and asked him to check the manuscript and write a blurb for the book. The book showed Benedict that she could reach a large audience and translate anthropological concepts into lay terms, a point driven home more strongly when she and Gene Weltfish adapted it as a pamphlet in 1944 as *The Races of Mankind*. Unfortunately, it also demonstrated the intensity of race hatred in the United States, including the United States Congress. At that time, the southern states were solidly Democratic in party but the Dixiecrat version of the Democratic party in the South was in stark contrast with the rest of that party. The Southern States and their representatives were strongly segregationist. The pamphlet written by Benedict and Weltfish sold millions of copies. Importantly, it became a UPA cartoon, and it was sponsored by American unions, which were at their peak at the time. Margaret Mead wrote in

Benedict's 1948 obituary : "(she) has proved perhaps the most important single translation into genuine popular education of the many years of careful research on race differences to which anthropologists have made a major contribution." Interestingly, *The New York Times Book Review* criticized the work in total, both the premise and the art work, writing: "until much more is known about human genetics it will hardly be possible to lay down the law on heredity vs. environment in measuring racial capability." Showing that even the liberal press of the time was, at root, biased, and showing how far in advance were Benedict and other anthropologists, such as, Weltfish and Mead. However, the success of her book on race led Ruth Benedict into popular presentations and causes of which the Shaw lectures were a major example. Other examples, were her postwar efforts to bring anthropologists together from around the world to address ways to avoid war and promote peace, her work with refugees in America and Europe, seeking to find ways at peaceful resettlement and problem-solving, and her addressing other problems in the "developed" world in contrast with earlier more typical field studies at the time in traditional societies.

Benedict provides strong evidence of where her ideas expressed in the Shaw lectures arose. They were a development of some of Boas's most strongly held values and concepts. For example, in the manuscript 'Contributions to Ethnology' she states : 'He himself often said that this problem was the relations between the objective world and man's subjective world as it had taken form in different cultures. He wanted to study man's cultural constructs with the same inductive methods that had proved indispensable in the study of the natural world.' She continued the argument stating that 'It has never been sufficiently realized how consistently throughout his life Boas defined the task of ethnology as the study of 'man's mental life', ' Boas was interested in the 'fundamental psychic attitudes of cultural groups,' and man's 'subjective worlds.'

In an obituary, one of a number she wrote, Benedict noted :

"What Thomas called the 'definition of a situation' Boas called, in its most striking manifestations, 'subjectively conditioned relations' attitudes that arise gradually by giving values and meanings to activities, as good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, purposive are causally determined. He believed that the world must be made safe for differences. He spoke out therefore against all American efforts set themselves up as arbiters of the world. In 1916, when the emotions of the last war were running high, he protested against any American who 'claims that the form of his own government is the best, nor for himself only, but also for the rest of mankind; that his interpretation of ethics, of religion, of standards of living, is right'. Such an American, he said, is mistakenly 'inclined to assume the role of a dispenser of happiness to mankind' and to overlook the fact 'that others may abhor what we worship (*American Sociological Review*)."

In the Shaw papers, which she wrote shortly after Boas's death, Benedict shows Boas as valuing those societies and people who seek to respect and improve human endeavors and individuals in a manner she had expanded in her 1941 Shaw Lectures on social synergy (Jan. 2, 1943 *The Nation*). She rejected both extremes regarding the nature-nurture argument,

environment-genetic dispute, in its multitudinous manifestations. With Boas, she held that both operate in human social and cultural life. Also, with Boas, she sought to move toward an empirical means for studying that significant relationship. Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* highlighted this trend. For many years anthropologists accepted as general truth that Benedict's Shaw Lectures were lost, destroyed by Benedict herself. Maslow and Honigman (1975) stated this as fact. Margaret Mead, Benedict's executor, had noted that the lectures were lost. However, Virginia Heyer Young (2005 : 334, n.6) notes that in 1995 Nancy McKechnie found four of the six lectures Benedict delivered. One other lecture was found in the Research Institute for the Study of Man. Indeed, Benedict published the first lecture in the *American Scholar*, giving the lie to another accepted truth that she was not happy with any of the lectures.

Her *Patterns of Culture* remains influential, though criticized as too general, and it is still remarkably readable and interesting. Benedict was among the few who applied anthropology to complex cultures in its early days. Like Boas, she was strongly drawn to social causes, and she also opposed racism and the bigotry of some so-called religious people, using anthropological data to combat these biases. She constantly expanded the range of her studies, showing the many ways culture is reflected in everyday life and choices. Moreover, she expanded the range of anthropology to complex societies, always stressing humanistic methods and insights in the process. The *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* stands as an indication of the way she planned to expand her work. With Terence she could truly state, "I am human, I consider nothing human alien to me."

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