Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Issue of Evolution

Derek Freeman argues that the central issue in the Mead-Freeman controversy is evolution and that Margaret Mead was anti-evolutionary. A review of Mead's writing on evolution demonstrates that she favored an evolutionary approach throughout her career. Freeman simply omits Mead's views on evolution in his attempt to discredit her work.

PAUL SHANKMAN

After reading a recent article by Derek Freeman, I had a curious sense of déjà vu. The article was entitled "Paradigms in Collision: Margaret Mead's Mistake and What It Has Done to Anthropology" (1997), and it reminded me that Freeman had published an article with almost the same title and similar content five years earlier (1992). But then Freeman has been relentlessly criticizing the work of Margaret Mead for the past fifteen years. And he shows no signs of tiring.

One of the most interesting aspects of Freeman's critique is that a number of intelligent people have come to believe it. Initially, Freeman argued that a young, gullible Mead mistook Samoan jokes about sexual conduct for the truth, and that this alleged mistake led to the false doctrine of absolute cultural determinism, which in turn had profound

intellectual consequences. Recently, Freeman has given more attention to the issue of evolution, which he believes is at the heart of the controversy. Specifically, he holds Mead responsible for the anti-evolutionary paradigm in which only cultural variables are important and in which "all human behavior is the result of social conditioning." For Freeman, evolution has become the ultimate issue in his critique of Mead and is the central focus of "Paradigms in Collision."

Freeman rejects the "Mead paradigm" in favor of an interactionist one that recognizes biological as well as cultural variables. Freeman also deplores the dominance of the "Mead paradigm" which, due to a cult-like loyalty to her, has perpetuated a "tabula rasa anthropology" from which the discipline has yet to recover. He believes that only when anthropologists recognize Mead's initial error and its disastrous intellectual consequences will the discipline have a promising future.

If evolution is not at the heart of Freeman's critique of Mead, if indeed both Freeman and Mead hold similar views of the relationship of biology and culture, then what is the point of Freeman's "Paradigms in Collision"?

There is high drama in Freeman's account: A lone dissenter from the conventional wisdom uncovers a great anthropologist's original sin in his search for truth. Her reputation is tarnished. What ensues is an epic struggle for the soul of a discipline held hostage by the ghost of a legendary figure. Margaret Mead, symbol of American anthropology, was anti-evolutionary. What could be worse?

Unfortunately, like so much of his critique of Mead, Freeman relies on a caricature of Mead's views and her influence on anthropology. Granted that it is an entertaining caricature full of implications about Freeman's own place in intellectual history. Yet a closer look at this argument demonstrates that on the fundamental issues of biology, culture, and evolution, Mead and Freeman are in substantial agreement. Mead was not anti-evolutionary; she held what are now conventional views on evolution, just like Freeman. So there are no "paradigms in collision." Freeman has simply omitted much of what Mead actually wrote on evolution. In this article, Freeman's and Mead's views on biology, culture, and evolution are reviewed. Freeman's misrepresentation of Mead's views raises questions about his scholarship, which is now the real issue in this long-running "controversy."

Paul Shankman is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado-Boulder, Boulder, CO 80309, who has done fieldwork in Samoa and historical research on the controversy. He is the author of "The History of Samoan Sexual Conduct and the Mead-Freeman Controversy," *published in* American Anthropologist *(1996).*

Mead's View of Biology, Culture, and Evolution

Mead's views on the interaction of biology and culture were complex, not simplistic, and developed over her long career. Early on, she emphasized the importance of culture, stating that differences between cultures arose from a common biological basis. This was the crux of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), in which Mead argued that adolescence was a universal biological process, but that there were differences in the way that this process was handled by different cultures. Cultural differences arose from a common biological basis, yet they could not be explained by biology alone. These differences suggested to Mead that there was no single way to manage adolescence. Americans could therefore make choices about handling this stage in the human life cycle.

In her early work, Mead did argue that human nature was extremely malleable. However, as historian Carl Degler (1991) found in his comprehensive review of Darwinian thought in the twentieth century, Mead's views on human nature developed over four decades during which the political and intellectual climate was changing. Thus, when she argued against racial and biological explanations, she emphasized culture; when she was discussing sex roles, biology received more attention. For example, in *Male and Female* (1949), Mead discussed the significance of biological differences in sex roles and sexuality.

Far from naïvely embracing the *"tabula rasa"* point of view, Mead specifically pointed out its weaknesses in the 1940s (1942, 1947), while noting the importance of the interaction of biology and culture in the human maturation process. Furthermore, in her presidential address to the American Anthropological Association in 1960, Mead stated that genetics is "enormously relevant to problems absolutely central to our discipline" and was concerned that research on genetics had been largely confined to physical anthropology (1961, 480). She also urged her colleagues to take advantage of "the opportunity provided by the new upsurge of interest in the whole field of evolution, in which human evolution is one part and cultural evolution a smaller one" (1961, 481). And she reminded anthropologists that Theodosius Dobzhansky, George Gaylord Simpson, and other natural scientists were interested in communicating with them about evolution (1961, 481). Given such public statements, can anyone take seriously Freeman's assertion that Mead believed that "all human behavior is the result of social conditioning" or that she was anti-evolutionary? Of course not. Freeman has simply neglected those parts of Mead's work that do not support his current views.

Freeman's View of Biology, Culture, and Evolution

Freeman's views are, in fact, very similar to Mead's. He often emphasizes the importance of culture. Like Mead, Freeman believes that since humans can learn non-genetically and transmit information symbolically, culture often gives meaning to behavior. He notes that people may attribute different cultural meanings to the same genetically prescribed behaviors. As an example, he cites the genetically prescribed behavior known as the eyebrow flash which means 'yes' in Samoa while meaning 'no' in Greece. According to Freeman, "It is the existence of such conventional behaviors, in great profusion, in all human populations, that establishes, indubitably, the *autonomy of culture*" (1980, 215; my emphasis).

On the issue of choice, Freeman is as much a cultural determinist as Mead. He states that "because cultural phenomena are particular alternatives, created by human agency in the course of history, it is always possible for these alternatives to be rapidly, and even radically changed . . . [T]he choice of new alternatives, is, in many instances, not connected in any significant way with the process of genetic evolution, or, for that matter, with human physiology" (1980, 215). He concludes that humans, "with their biologically given and culturally nurtured capacity for alternative action, cannot be said to have any kind of 'ultimate' nature" (1981, 99–100).

Evolution

In "Paradigms in Collision, " Freeman stresses our primate heritage, our evolutionary history, and the emergence of culture as a biologically based means of allowing choices to be made and transmitted through non-genetic mechanisms. This view of culture, based on a common biological heritage, is one he shares with Mead. She stated that "Cultural systems will be treated as extensions of the power to learn, store, and transmit information, and the evolution of culture as dependent upon biological developments of these abilities and the cultural developments that actualize them" (1964, 31).

The emphasis on cultural variables at one point in time and biological variables at another may give the appearance of the existence of two very different paradigms, but Freeman seems to have no problem embracing the "autonomy of culture" when criticizing sociobiology (1980), while invoking evolution in his critique of Mead (1997). For Mead, this was a matter of emphasis, not one of irreconcilable differences. In her book *Continuities in Cultural Evolution* she stated that:

> At some points in the history of anthropology it has been important to stress the discontinuity between man as a culture-building animal and all other living creatures. It has also been important to stress that man is a mammal with certain types of behavior appropriate to mammals and to identify these behaviors which can be recognized as related between monkeys, apes, and man (1964, 25).

Mead, along with most anthropologists, would no doubt have agreed with Freeman when he asserts that "humans, like our chimpanzee cousins, far from being empty tablets at birth, are born with a phylogenetically given primate nature, components of which remain with us throughout our lives beneath all of the conventional behaviors that we acquire by learning from other members of the society to which we belong" (1997, 70).

Margaret Mead's work in cultural anthropology in the 1920s exploring the effect of culture on the behavior and personalities of children and adults is honored in this 1998 U.S. postage stamp, part of the U.S. Postal Service's "Celebrate the Century" series.

Interactionism

What of the modern interactionist paradigm that Freeman advocates? Freeman believes in a view of human evolution in which the genetic and exogenetic (i.e., cultural) are distinct but interacting parts of a single system (1983, 299) and that genetic factors combine with environmental factors to influence behavioral differences among individuals (1997, 71). Mead anticipated this position in 1935 when discussing the role of innate temperament and its interaction with culture. In *Behavior and Evolution,* edited by Anne Roe and George Gaylord Simpson, she stated that "We can get some picture of how change occurs only when each individual is fully specified in his genetic and experiential peculiarity . . . " (1958, 496).

Given Mead's interactionist views of the relationship of biology and culture, and her interest in evolution, articulated *long before* Freeman developed his current views on these subjects, one might expect Freeman to review and discuss Mead's actual positions as they developed over her fifty-year career, especially since he is willing to discuss how his own views have changed over the course of his career. Yet Freeman cites Mead selectively and omits mention of her interest in evolution. He does not even pretend to review Mead's work on this subject.

This omission raises an important question. If evolution is not at the heart of Freeman's critique of Mead, if indeed both Freeman and Mead hold similar views of the relationship of biology and culture, then what is the point of Freeman's "Paradigms in Collision"? Freeman attempts to enlist the legitimacy of evolution and interactionism as a weapon in his effort to cast doubt on the work of Mead, but there are no "paradigms in collision."[2] Indeed, the so-called central issue in Freeman's critique is not an issue at all.

By misrepresenting Mead's views and by presenting himself as the guardian of evolution and interactionism, Freeman asks his readers to dismiss Mead's work as mistaken, misguided, and anachronistic, and accept Freeman's position as accurate, responsible, and thoroughly scientific. The choice, however, is

Margaret Mead during her studies in Samoa. (Corbis-Bettmann)

not between Mead on the one hand and Freeman on the other. It is between wondering whether Freeman has read what Mead said and, for whatever reasons, omitted passages that do not support his argument, or whether he did not carefully read Mead and therefore is not fully aware of what she has written. *Neither of these choices reflects well on Freeman's scholarship.*

The World View of Derek Freeman

Freeman's own discovery of evolution's importance came rather late, in the 1960s. And there is little that is new or original in Freeman's discussion of the worthwhile topics of evolution and interactionism. Evolution is part of most general textbooks in anthropology in the U.S., despite Freeman's insistence on the negative influence of the so-called "Mead paradigm." Nevertheless, Freeman portrays himself as a victim in the lonely struggle for truth. He sees himself as the voice of reason among "irrational" anthropologists following the "prescientific ideology" of a "totemic mother." Freeman even asserts that a top professional journal, the *American Anthropologist,* has suppressed his work in "the interests of a ruling ideology" (1997, 73). He does not mention that this same journal has published more exchanges on his critique of Mead than any other. This fact is irrelevant: the rhetoric has served its purpose.

The general approach that Freeman has employed to promote his argument and himself was described in broad terms by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1979) well before the Mead/Freeman controversy existed. At the outset, Sahlins comments, Professor X publishes a theory despite evidence to the contrary. When scholars familiar with the evidence question Professor X's work, he denounces them in "the highest moral tones" and engages in attacks on them personally. The battle lines are drawn, and he has now become "the controversial Professor X." His ideas are discussed seriously by nonprofessionals, especially journalists. Soon he has become a familiar figure in the media where nonprofessionals have difficulty challenging him and demonstrating the weaknesses in his argument. It is through this process that Professor X, like Freeman, has gained popular respectability.

With each new version of his critique of Mead, Freeman has escalated the rhetoric and his importance in this self-made controversy. What began fifteen years ago as a critique of the "Boasian paradigm" has become a critique of the "Mead paradigm." Mead's alleged "mistake" in Samoa has become her "fateful hoaxing." Freeman himself has gone from a critic of Mead to a self-styled "heretic" in pursuit of truth against the conventional wisdom of a discipline. The title of a new edition of *Margaret Mead and Samoa* (1983) released in Australia reflects Freeman's increasing sense of stature in relation to Mead; it is now *Margaret Mead and the Heretic* (1996). And the title of Freeman's recent article, "Paradigms in Collision," implies near-mythic proportions of Freeman's critique.

Yet *Coming of Age in Samoa* was not the intellectual disaster of momentous consequence that Freeman believes. The book posed important questions for the general public at the time it was written in 1928 and for about four decades thereafter. That is why it became a popular classic, not because it is a model for professional scholarship today. *Coming of Age in Samoa* was never a sacred text for most anthropologists. Although Mead and *Coming of Age in Samoa* were enormously popular with the general public, within the profession neither she nor her book led generations of anthropologists to embrace the so-called "Mead paradigm." Her very popularity led academic anthropologists to treat her work with caution, recognizing its limitations as well as its strengths. Like so much of the anthropology from the early part of the century, ideas proposed by Mead in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were later

criticized, modified, and revised. Thus Mead is not the central theoretical figure in anthropology that Freeman suggests, although she did make a number of important contributions.

No wonder that most professional anthropologists have lost interest in Freeman's argument. His critique of Mead and his history of the discipline are deeply flawed. Yet the same style of argument that has turned off anthropologists has attracted the media, and intelligent people have been drawn to Freeman's appeals to truth, science, and evolution. This is unfortunate because these are not the real issues involved. The truth about the controversy is more mundane. Evolution and interactionism are old news. *Coming of Age in Samoa* was written in 1928. Mixing these ingredients together in Freeman's intellectual Cuisinart and adding words like "hoax" and "paradigm" may be enticing, but it does not make for good scholarship. By exaggerating Mead's theoretical place in academic anthropology, Freeman implicitly magnifies his own importance and neglects her real contributions. By relying so heavily on caricature, omission, and overstatement, Freeman, far from saving anthropology, has become an intellectual speedbump in the way of our understanding Samoa, the work of Margaret Mead, and the state of anthropology today.

Remembering Margaret Mead

When the dust eventually settles on this never-ending controversy, how will Mead and Freeman be remembered? Freeman will be remembered for his tireless assault on Mead, which has received widespread attention, in part because his misrepresentations are so boldly stated that relatively few people have bothered to check the historical record. But Freeman's proverbial fifteen minutes of fame will expire, and his contributions are limited.

Anthropologists will remember Mead as more than the object of Freeman's critique simply because, over the course of her long career, she did make a number of lasting contributions. Mead was a pioneer. In a span of fifteen years between 1925 and 1939, she made five field trips to the South Pacific, studied eight different cultures, and published popular and professional works on most of them. While these works are not particularly important today, they became part of the foundation on which future anthropologists built. Mead was also among the first anthropologists to focus on childhood, adolescence, and gender as important topics of research; today anthropologists approach these issues more wisely because of her work. Mead's efforts to bring teams of male and female anthropologists to the field, instead of only individuals, improved data collection and analysis. She was among the first to use still photography and film in the field. Most importantly, Mead almost single-handedly popularized anthropology for the general public, putting the discipline on the map. And, whatever her shortcomings, she did all of these things at a time when women were not expected to be professionals. It is for these reasons, and many more, that Mead deserves recognition as the pioneering figure that she was.

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Notes

1. Degler concludes that Mead's changing views on the the biological differences between men and women were a "harbinger of things to come: the emergence of the sociobiological approach to the ancient question of the nature of the sexes, and the rediscovery by a reinvigorated feminist movement of the human values of differences between men and women" (1991, 138).

Mead did become involved in the controversy over sociobiology. In his autobiography, E. O. Wilson, a founder of sociobiology, recalls that at the 1976 American Anthropological Association meetings, a motion was made to formally censure sociobiology and to cancel two symposia on the subject that had been previously scheduled. "During the debate on the matter Margaret Mead rose indignantly, great walking stick in hand, to challenge the very idea of adjudicating a theory. She condemned the motion as a 'book-burning proposal.' Soon afterward the motion was defeated—but not by an impressive margin" (1994, 331).

The following year, at a conference on human behavior, Mead invited Wilson to dinner to discuss sociobiology. He remembers, "I was nervous then, expecting America's mother figure to scold me about the nature of genetic determinism. I had nothing to fear. She wanted to stress that she, too, had published ideas on the biological basis of social behavior" (1994, 348). Thus, at the very end of her career, Mead's interest in the role of biology in human behavior was apparent.

2. There is such a cultural determinist school/social constructionist school of thought, and here there are "paradigms in collision," but this school draws on a different intellectual ancestry than Margaret Mead (Ehrenreich and McIntosh 1997). □