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5 Mead Presents Boas with an Absolute Answer

The twenty-three-year-old Margaret Mead arrived in American Samoa in August of 1925. She did not, as she has recorded, „really know much about fieldwork," and in the rush before she left New York she had had no occasion for any study of the Samoan language. She was carrying with her a letter of introduction from the surgeon general of the U.S. Navy (who had known her father-in-law in medical school), and when this was presented to the chief medical officer of the naval station at Pago Pago, she was assigned within a few days of her arrival a young Samoan nurse, who had been in the United States and spoke excellent English, to work with her for an hour a day on Samoan. For the next six weeks or so, in the enervating heat of the port of Pago Pago and the „generally unco-operative atmosphere" of her hotel, Mead studied Samoan.1

66 Mead's Samoan Research Toward the end of September, as she cast about for a place in which she might study adolescence, she visited a girls' boarding school of the London Missionary Society at the western end of Tutuila, and by 11 October, when she reported to Boas on her first six weeks or so in Samoa, she had briefly inspected almost every village on the island of Tutuila that could be reached by road from the port of Pago Pago. The villages of Tutuila, she told Boas, were either very much influenced by American goods and American visitors or so very small and difficult to reach as to make them impossible places to work. In this predicament, she reported, she had decided to go to Ta'u, one of the three small islands of the Manu'an archipelago, lying some seventy miles to the east of Tutuila, where there was a government outpost which was visited by a naval vessel at about three-week intervals.2

She was particularly anxious, she told Boas, to have his advice on whether when she got to Manu'a she should live with a Samoan family or in the household of the one white family on Ta'u, that of Edward R. Holt, the chief pharmacist's mate of the naval medical dispensary. To the first of these alternatives Mead had, from her observations of Samoan life in Tutuila, developed a rooted antipathy. „If I lived in a Samoan house with a Samoan family," she told Boas, I might conceivably get into a little more intimate touch with that particular family. But I feel that such advantage as might be reaped would be more than offset by the loss in efficiency due to the food and the nervewracking conditions of living with half a dozen people in the same room in a house without walls, always sitting on the floor and sleeping in the constant expectation of having a pig or a chicken thrust itself upon one's notice. This is not an easy climate to work in; I find my efficiency diminished to about one-half as it is, and I believe it would be cut in two again if I had to live for weeks on end in a Samoan house.3

By 11 October when Mead wrote these words to Boas, she had already come to know Mrs. Holt, who was in Pago Pago Mead Presents Boas with an Absolute Answer 67 awaiting the birth of her second child, and her decision to live with the Holts (as is apparent from another letter written two days later) was in fact already made. The native food she said in this letter of 13 October 1925, was too starchy for her to lite on for six months, whereas with the Holts she would have a bed to sleep on and the food would be much better, as Navy people had canteen privileges.4

After seven weeks spent mostly in the vicinity of the naval station at Pago Pago, Mead reported to Boas that her knowledge of Samoan was progressing more slowly than at first and she was intending to spend the next five or six weeks, before Mrs. Holt and her baby would be ready to return to Ta'a, partly in the girls' boarding school she had visited earlier, where no English was spoken, and partly with a half-caste family at Leone, where she would be able to hear Samoan spoken most of the time. Instead, with the help of the mother of some half-caste children she had met in Honolulu, she spent ten days with the family of Ufiti, county chief of Tualautu, of the village of Vai-togi, on the iron-bound

coast to the west of Pago Pago. She had been given a letter of introduction to Ufiti by the secretary of native affairs in the naval government.

When Mead arrived in Samoa at the end of August 1925, with her letter from the surgeon-general of the U.S. Navy, she had been invited to dine on the flagship of the admiral of the American Pacific Fleet, an honor that had, she reported, greatly impressed the „very rank-conscious Samoans." Accordingly, on her arrival in Vaitogi she was carefully chaperoned. Ufiti's eldest son was studying for the ministry, while his daughter, Fa'amotu, was a taupou, or ceremonial virgin. Fa'amotu, who spoke a little English, was given the responsibility of being Mead's constant companion, even sleeping beside her under the same mosquito net.5

Because she did not know what „the consequences might be in the roles that would be assigned," Mead concealed from her Samoan hosts that she already had a husband, and Ufiti, supposing her to be other than she was, conferred upon her the title of ceremonial virgin, this being, in Samoan eyes, a very high honor. During her stay in Vaitogi she was also instructed for a few days in the rudiments of the respect language and etiquette of Samoa, by two visiting talking chiefs. 6

Although, according to Mead, she had never spent „a more peacefully happy and comfortable" ten days in all her life than in Ufiti's household at Vaitogi, she did not alter her determination to live with the Holts. When she reached Ta'u, having made the crossing from Tutuila on 9 November 1925 in a U.S. Navy minesweeper, she elected to live m the comfort of the medical dispensary, with the local representatives of the naval government of American Samoa.

At the time of Mead's arrival in Ta'u, an island of about fourteen square miles, which rises like a huge cone to an elevation of nearly 3,000 feet, the Manu'ans had been converts to protestant Christianity for some eighty years, and governed by the United States for twenty-one years. When the islands of Tutuila and Aunu'u were ceded to the United States on 17 April 1900, following a treaty of the previous year among Great Britain, Germany, and the United States, the Tui Manu'a, as the sovereign chief of the highest-ranking polity in the whole of Samoa, initially resisted the heavy pressures being placed upon him; on 16 July 1904, however, Manu'a was finally erected into a territory or district of the United States, and those Manu'ans of rank who had signed the deed of cession each received from Theodore Roosevelt, the president of the United States, a proclamation diploma, together with „a silver medal (with case)" and „a silver watch and chain (with case)." From this time onward the people of Manu'a came ever increasingly under the influence of American institutions and values.8

On 30 June 1908 a government school was opened on Ta'u, with „a most gratifying attendance." Just over seven years later, however, this school and most of the other buildings in Manu'a were destroyed in the devastating hurricane of 10 January 1915, after which about two-thirds of the population of 2100 were taken, in the U.S. naval vessels Fortune and Princeton to live for a time on Tutuila and to acquaint themselves with the marvels of the port of Pago Pago. In April 1915 the building of the Manu'a Co-operative Society, which had been

severely damaged in the hurricane, was taken over by the naval government to be converted into a medical dispensary and radio office. The government school was reopened in 1920 under Lieutenant A. J. Link, M.C., United States Navy, with the hospital corps man and the radio man as his assistants. By the time Mead began her researches, the government school had an enrollment of 202, with a staff consisting of a Samoan principal and three Samoan assistants. On Ta'u at this time there were six copra sheds and a trading store of the South Seas Pacific Co. About every three weeks a naval vessel carried passengers and their freight to and fro between Pago Pago and Ta'u, free of charge, while the radio office maintained regular schedules with the naval radio station in Tutuila, so that Mead could contact Boas, Benedict, and others in the United States by telecommunication, as the

need arose. Tufele Fa'atoia, who was in 1925-1926 the district governor of Manu'a, spoke excellent English, having been educated in Hawaii at U.S. government expense, and, Mead herself (in a letter of 7 March 1926) remarked on the European character of the chiefs living at the western end of the island of Ta'u, in the vicinity of her research headquarters. Albert F. Judd, president of the board of trustees of the Bemice P. Bishop Museum, who visited Manu'a early in 1926, during the course of Mead's fieldwork, judged the Manu'ans to be the leaders of American Samoa, in both „thought and progress.“9

On her arrival on Ta'u, Mead at once became a member of the Holt household. She was given a small room on the back veranda of the large, one-storied building which contained both the medical dispensary and the radio station, and this room in the main outpost in Manu'a of the naval government of American Samoa, a photograph of Boas having been placed on one of its walls, became her research headquarters. Before Mead left New York, Boas had specifically cautioned her against embarking on a general study of the ethnology of Samoa, and as soon as she had settled in, despite her limited knowledge of Samoan,(10) she began work on her special project. From the sixty-eight girls between the ages of eight and twenty in the three villages of

Luma, Si'ufaga, and Faleasao at the western end of the island of Ta'u, Mead selected fifty for study, eleven of them being „children who showed no mammary signs of puberty,“ fourteen „children who would probably mature within the next year or year and a half,“ and twenty-five being „past puberty,“ or first menstruation.11 From these twenty-five girls, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty years, all of whom were considered by their communities to be not yet adults, Mead drew her principal informants.12

In front of the medical dispensary, facing the sea, there was a small Samoan-type house in which Mead was also able to work with her adolescent subjects. After the school holidays began in the second half of December, she was able to borrow the schoolhouse to give intelligence and other tests, and to interview each girl privately. Being small and slight, Mead could move comfortably among the fourteen-year-olds who were her daily companions. Proceeding in this way, she gradually built up a census of the village and worked out the background of each of the girls she was studying. The Christmas and New Year vacation of the U.S. government school on Ta'u was for eight weeks from the third Monday in December, and soon after the school had resumed late in February 1926, the researches on female adolescence into which Mead had plunged in mid-No-vember 1925 were (as she noted in a letter on 7 March 1926) „almost completed.“ They had been in progress for little more than three months, and had been „terribly complicated“ by a severe hurricane on New Year's Day, 1926, after which for several weeks everyone was busy with repairing the widespread damage and informants were „not to be had for love or money.“13

On 18 February 1926 an expedition from the Bernice P. Bishop Museum arrived in Manu'a for a stay of some sixteen days to collect shells and ethnological information. At the invitation of the district governor, its members together with Mead made a short visit to Fitiuta at the eastern end of the island of Ta'u. With the resumption of the government school, it had become, as Mead noted after her return from this visit, „practically impossible“ to get hold of her adolescent informants. On 8 March 1926 she went on a visit to the islands of Ofu and Olo-sega; from this point onward, most of her time was given to the general study of the ethnology of Manu'a.14

During her stay in Manu'a, Mead did not have „any political participation in village life,“ as there was in Manu'a in the 1920s a strict prohibition(15) against any woman participating in any of the chiefly assemblies in which decisions were made concerning economic, political, ceremonial, and religious life, and before which from time to time those who had seriously offended against Samoan custom were arraigned and punished. Again, during the final five months of her stay, when, in the aftermath of the hurricane of 1 January 1926, „adult energies were devoted almost exclusively to house

building," she had „very little opportunity to witness social ceremonies of any kind."16

Faced by these severe disadvantages, Mead was compelled, in her study of many of the fundamental aspects of Samoan life, to „completelyrely on informants." Working in this restricted way, from the environment of the medical dispensary, and coping as best she could with the terrible complications caused by the hurricane that had devastated Ta'u only seven weeks after her arrival, Mead struggled to construct a picture of Samoa that would answer the problem that Boas had set her. When she returned to Pago Pago from Manu'a in May 1926, to embark on a six weeks' voyage to Europe, via Australia, she felt a „fierce longing" for contact with people who would understand her work, and who would give her some perspective on whether she had actually done what she had been „sent out to do."17

Throughout her nine months' stay in Samoa, Mead had been in constant correspondence with Benedict, who had become her anthropological alter ego. In the summer of 1925, when Mead set out for Samoa, the two women had traveled together as far as the Grand Canyon, from where Mead went on to San Francisco while Benedict returned to Zuni in New Mexico. From Zuni, Santa Fe, and Pena Blanca, in the month of August 1925, Benedict wrote to Mead seven times: she would be reckoning

the time of their separation, she said, by the three-week intervals between the steamers carrying Mead's letters, rather as the Zuni counted off their year with prayerstick plantings.18

As we have seen, by as early as mid 1924, Benedict and Mead in their enthusiastic discussions together had become totally committed to the goal of achieving an understanding of human behavior through the study of cultural patterns. Mead had taken with her to Samoa all of the questions about deviance from pattern that Benedict had prepared for her, together with an anthology, which Benedict had compiled, containing Amy Lowell's poem „Patterns," with its final agonized line: „Christ!

What are patterns for?"19

From Cochiti in September 1925 Benedict had written to Mead of her deep yearning to „find a really undiscovered country." This she was to do, among the Pima, in the summer of 1927, some nine months after Mead's return to the United States. The process of discovery was expedited in September 1926, when Mead and Benedict, after their reunion in Rome at the International Congress of Americanists, began to discuss on their voyage home a „host of new problems," bearing on cultural patterning, which Mead had brought back with her from Samoa.20

Back in New York, Mead at once took up the position of assistant curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History, which had been offered to her by cable while she was still in Manu'a. With scarcely a pause she plunged into writing up her materials on Samoan adolescence, and by the spring of 1927 she had completed (except for chapter 2, which was added later) the first twelve chapters of what was to become Coming of Age in Samoa. During this same period she also acted as an assistant to Benedict in her anthropology course at Barnard College, and their discussions together (especially of chapter 11 of Mead's manuscript on deviance from pattern among Samoan adolescents) continued unabated, until the summer of 1927, when Benedict went to work among the Pima arid Mead traveled to Europe to make a study of Oceanic materials in German museums.21

Earlier in 1927, Mead had sent the first draft of her account of adolescence in Samoa to Harper Brothers, only to have it rejected. At the instigation of the anthropologist and author George Dorsey she then went to see William Morrow, who was just setting up as a publisher. Morrow put it to her that she should round off her book with an account of the significance of her findings for contemporary Americans. To this Mead readily agreed, it being very much her view that „if one society could bring its children through adolescence painlessly," as did Samoa, „then there was a chance that other

societies could do so also.“ She had in fact been lecturing to an assortment of audiences, in and about New York, on this very theme from soon after her return from Samoa.22

This then was the situation when, in the summer of 1927, from her research base in the Southwest, Benedict wrote to Boas describing the contrast between the Zuni and the Pima as „unbelievable.“ It presented, she wrote later, „probably the most abrupt cultural break“ in America. Benedict had, with „a sense of revelation,“ recognized, according to Mead, the fundamental differences between „those American Indian cultures that emphasize ecstasy (for which she adopted Nietzsche's term Dionysian) and those that emphasize moderation and balance (for which she adopted Nietzsche's term Apollonian).“ This brilliant insight, as Mead felt it to be, Benedict developed in a paper that was the precursor to her book of 1934, Patterns of Culture. Presented to the International Congress of Americanists in New York in 1928, it was entitled „Psychological Types in the Cultures of the Southwest.“ Nietzsche, in his studies of Greek tragedy, Benedict pointed out, had named and described two diametrically different ways of arriving at the values of existence, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Comparable value systems, she claimed, were to be found in the region of the Southwest, so that among the Zuni, as among other Indian tribes of the Southwest, „a fundamental psychological set“ had „created an intricate cultural pattern to express its own preferences.“23

By the autumn of 1927 Benedict and Mead had become more convinced than ever that in all human cultures the traditional patterns of behavior set the mold into which human na

ture flowed. Mead was at work on her monograph on the social organization of Manu'a, and she eagerly grasped the opportunity of applying Benedict's newly conceived theory of culture as „personality writ large“ to her Samoan materials. Together they „spent hours discussing how a given temperamental approach to living could come so to dominate a culture that all who were born in it would become the willing or unwilling heirs to that view of the world,“ taking as their example the Samoans about whom Mead was then writing. It thus transpired that the first written application of Benedict's new theory appeared in Mead's account, in Social Organization of Manu'a, of the „dominant cultural attitudes“ of the Samoans, „every detail of the phrasing“ of which was „thrashed out“ by Benedict and Mead, as they „discussed at length the kind of personality that had been institutionalized in Samoan culture.“24

There was among the Zuni, according to Benedict's new theory, an „Apollonian delight in formality,“ and in „the intricacies and elaborations of organization.“ While Mead excluded from her account of Samoa the actual terms Benedict had borrowed from Nietzsche, she nonetheless depicted the Samoans in unmistakably Apollonian terms. „All of a Samoan's interest,“ she wrote, was „centered upon his relationship with his fellows within an elaborate and cherished social pattern.“ Further, the particular implication of this social pattern was an „emphasis upon social blessedness within an elaborate, impersonal structure,“ the „formal social personality“ of Samoa being that of „a devotee of a careful observance of all the decreed amenities.“ These descriptions could well have been applied by Benedict to the Zuni, and indeed Mead, on a later occasion, specifically noted that in both Zuni and Samoa it was „the individual endowed with a capacity to feel strongly“ who was „maladjusted.“25

There is thus the clearest evidence that with the emergence of Benedict's vision of culture as „personality writ large“ in the summer of 1927, Mead construed her data from Samoa in this same way, and that Benedict's new theory powerfully influenced Mead in the writing of the three chapters she added to Coming of Age in Samoa early in 1928. The first of these was chapter 2, Mead's idyllic vignette of „A Day in Samoa.“ Benedict's new configurational approach to culture had an even more important influence on the two final chapters of Coming of Age, which Mead wrote at William Morrow's suggestion. Benedict and Mead (to use a phrase from Benedict's letter to Mead of 5 March 1926) had both been brought up on „Papa Franz's milk,“ and after they had worked so intensively together on „the phenomenon of social pressure and its absolute determination in shaping the individuals within

its bounds," Mead was ready to depict Samoa as possessing a culture congruent with the Apollonian characteristics she had described in her application of Benedict's „brilliant insight" to her Samoan materials, and to avow cultural determinism in absolute terms.26

Boas' devising of Mead's researches of 1925-1926, as we have seen, had stemmed directly from his recognition, in 1924, of the „fundamental need for a scientific and detailed investigation of hereditary and environmental conditions," and, as Mead herself acknowledged, his specific reason for sending her to Samoa was that he wanted „a study to see how much adolescent behavior is physiologically determined and how much culturally determined." This study he hoped would bear significantly on the nature-nurture problem, which had hitherto defied the best efforts of many of the leading intellects of the day, including that of Boas himself.

This was, however, an impossibly difficult problem to foist upon a graduate student as sparsely experienced as was the twenty-three-year-old Margaret Mead at the outset of her Samoan researches. For one thing, although she had for some three years been a student of anthropology as it was taught by Boas and his associates, Mead lacked any systematic training in biology, and was thus by no means scientifically equipped to investigate the subtle and complex interaction, in Samoan behavior, of biological and cultural variables. During her first two months in Samoa, when she was working in Tutuila, she found herself saying under her breath, „I can't do it. I can't do it." In the end however, in Manu'a, despite numerous difficulties, she was able to collect information on some twenty-five adolescent girls. This however did not amount to anything like a science and detailed investigation of hereditary and environmental conditions.„ Indeed a critical reading of Mead's writings on Samoa reveals that she did not, at any time, either on Tutuila or in Manu'a, carry out any systematic comparison of hereditary and environmental conditions. Thus on her return to the United States in 1926 she was in no position to analyze the nature of the interaction between genetic and exogenetic variables in the behavior of Samoan adolescents. In this predicament she adopted the stratagem of using Samoa as what has come to be known in anthropology as a „negative instance."27

In his planning of Mead's Samoan researches Boas had fully accepted that adolescence, in Europe and the United States was a difficult period. For example, in a letter he wrote to Mead on the Sve'of her departure for Samoa, he noted that we find very often among ourselves during the period of adolescence a strong rebellious spirit that may be expressed in sullenness or in sudden outbursts." That this was the case in the United States was also fully recognized by Mead, but, given the „determinism of culture" in which she had been taught to believe, it might be, she surmised, that in some remote part of the world, such as Samoa, things were wholly different. And from this she derived the supposition that „if a society could be found in which the growing boys and girls missed out on all this storm and stress, then the anthropologist would know … that this storm and stress was not inevitable."28

This, then, became Mead's homespun approach to the immeasurably complex problem that Boas had required her to study. Having failed, in her perplexing predicament, to investigate scientifically the actual interaction of biological and cultural variables in Samoan behavior, she turned instead to the purported invalidation of a preexisting theoretical generalization by a „negative instance." That this was the method she adopted Mead confirmed in an interview in 1970 with T. George Harris and J. Diener, during which there occurred this exchange, referring specifically to her Samoan researches:

Harris: You had a beautiful technique going. There were all these theories around—piled up by centuries of philosophers and added to by psychologists—that claimed to apply to all mankind. You went after the single negative, one culture in which the theory broke down.

Diener: Sure, one negative is worth a thousand positives. It kills the theory.

Mead: That was the first stage of anthropology really. Up until 1939 we used primitive cultures—conveniently simpler than our own—to challenge assertions …29

Again, a few years later in another interview Mead remarked, „in anthropology you only have to show once that it is possible for a culture to make, say, a period of life easy, where it is hard everywhere else, to have made your point.“ Here also, Mead is alluding to her Samoan researches, and in particular to her conclusion that among the Samoans adolescence is the age of maximum ease, in a society „replete with easy solutions for all conflicts.“30

This exemplary society in which, in conspicuous contrast to the United States, growing up was „so easy“ became her negative instance, and, clutching it like a talisman, she swept on to an unequivocal answer to the general question she had posed in the introduction to Coming of Age in Samoa: „Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization?“ Certain of the absolute truth of cultural determinism, and having attributed what she claimed to be the untroubled character of adolescence in Samoa to the ease of Samoan culture, Mead went on to pronounce her main theoretical conclusion:

If it is proved that adolescence is not necessarily a specially difficult period in a girl's life—and proved it is if we can find any society in which that is so—then what accounts for the presence of storm and stress in American adolescents? First, we may say quite simply that there must be something in the two civilizations to account for the difference. If the same process takes a different form in the two different environments, we cannot make any explanations in terms of the process, for that is the same in both cases.31

In other words, any explanation in biological terms of the presence of storm and stress in American adolescents was totally excluded. The conclusion to which Mead was led by her depiction of Samoa as a negative instance was thus of an extreme order. Instead of arriving at an estimate of the relative strength of biological puberty and cultural pattern, as Boas had anticipated, Mead dismissed biology, or nature, as being of no significance whatsover in accounting for the presence of storm and stress in American adolescents, and claimed the determinism of culture, or nurture, to be absolute.

Boas had believed, according to Mead, that her researches in Samoa would indicate that culture was „very important.“ How then did he react to the revelation that Mead and Benedict, in their enthusiasm for cultural patterning, had prepared for him? Some time after Coming of Age in Samoa had been submitted to him for criticism, he said to Mead during a departmental meeting, „About that manuscript. Come to lunch with me next Tuesday“; and then, turning to Ruth Benedict, „You had better come too.“ Mead was „devastated“ by his tone of voice, and on the „fatal Tuesday morning“ she anxiously paced the floor of her office in the American Museum of Natural History saying to herself „I have betrayed him, like everybody else.“ She need not have worried. As she reports, the only criticism that Boas ever offered of what she had written in Coming of Age in Samoa was the quite trifling comment that she had not made clear „the difference between passionate and romantic love.“32

By this time, at almost seventy years of age, Boas was the veteran of years of unrelenting opposition to the doctrines of hereditarians like Davenport, Osborn, Grant, and Stoddard. To Jacob Epstein, who sculpted Boas during a visit to New York in 1927, he „seemed to be a man of great courage both mental and physical,“ and „as spirited as a fighting cock.“ After years of combating the battle-cry of „nature not nurture,“

goas was still, in 1928, hopeful of turning the tables on the eu-genicists and their supporters with a singular anthropological instance—an instance that would be a striking exemplification of his claim of 1916 that „the social stimulus is infinitely more potent than the biological mechanism.“ It was

precisely with this kind of exemplification that, if credence were to be placed in her account, he had been presented by Mead, and so closely was it in accord with his own cherished beliefs that he voiced not a word of criticism of its conclusion that culture, or nurture, was the absolute determinant of the events of adolescence.33

This was the acceptance for which Mead had most hoped. In Sydney, Australia, in October 1928 she proudly told A. R. Kadcliffe-Brown that it was Boas who had planned her work in Samoa, and in Coming of Age in Samoa she acknowledged that it was to Professor Franz Boas that she owed the inspiration and the direction of her problem, the training that had prepared her to undertake her investigations in Samoa, and the criticism of her results. Prodded by George Dorsey, who looked on Boas as, beyond all question, the world's greatest anthropologist, she asked Papa Franz if he would introduce her „psychological study of primitive youth“ to the reading public. This he agreed to do, and when Coming of Age in Samoa (this title having been suggested by Dorsey) was published in New York at the end of August 1928, it contained a highly approving foreword by the intellectual leader of American anthropology.34

Anthropologists, explained Boas, had come to doubt that adolescence was an unavoidable period of adjustment through which everyone had to pass, and he was grateful that Miss Mead, by „having undertaken to identify herself so completely with Samoan youth,“ had in „the results of her painstaking investigation,“ confirmed „the suspicion long held by anthropologists, that much of what we ascribe to human nature is no more than a reaction to the restraints put upon us by our civilization.“ In his Anthropology and Modern Life, published very soon after Coming of Age in Samoa, Boas made this general conclusion more specific by declaring that „the studies of Dr. Margaret Mead on the adolescents of Samoa“ had shown that „with the freedom of sexual life, the absence of a large number of conflicting ideals, and the emphasis upon forms that to us are irrelevant, the adolescent crisis disappears.“35

When her book appeared at the end of August 1928, Mead had already embarked on her second field expedition to the South Seas. In Sydney, on the night of 26 October 1928, en route to the Admiralty Islands, she dreamed that Coming of Age had failed so completely that the publishers had withdrawn it from publication. This anxiety was misplaced, for her book, with a theme and conclusion wonderfully in accord with the pervasive intellectual mood of the late 1920s, was an immediate and spectacular success. By December 1928 there had been a second printing. Coming of Age in Samoa had become a bestseller, and a book said to be of exceptional scientific significance.36

While Mead had been writing Coming of Age in Samoa, behaviorism had continued to flourish. J. B. Watson, in a steady flow of articles (published in book form in 1928 under the title The Ways of Behaviorism), had continued to proclaim that nurture not nature was responsible for human behavior.37 In 1927, V. F. Calverton, the editor of the Modern Quarterly, in discussing Watson's doctrines, claimed that environmentalism had become the great movement of the age. For Calverton, this movement was the expression of a glorious faith in environment and possibilities of change and progress, and he depicted the environmentalists of the late 1920s as standing in unqualified opposition to those „heredity fiends, the eugenists.“38

The struggle against hereditarian doctrines in which Boas and his followers had been openly engaged since 1916 was, then, still very much alive in 1927 when Mead, with Benedict's active assistance, was formulating her general conclusion about her Samoan researches. Further, although with the vigorous campaigning of Watson and others the balance of opinion had shifted in favor of the environmentalists, the nature-nurture issue, as it applied to human behavior, remained unresolved.

The mood of the day, as R. L. Finney noted in 1927, was one that craved „finality.“39

It was this longed-for finality that Mead purported to provide, and it was precisely as a conclusive contribution to the protracted nature-nurture debate that Coming of Age in Samoa was greeted by the intellectuals of the day. One of the first reviews to appear, in the New York Times of 4 November 1928, noted that the question at issue was whether „the difficulties of the transition from childhood to adult life“ were „due to adolescence itself, and, therefore, universal and unavoidable“ or „the result of the impact between developing youth and a civilization which at once restrains and complicates.“ This question, which was, of course, Boas' special instance of the problem of determining „what is hereditary and what is not,“ had, the reviewer declared, been answered „in an extraordinary fashion“ by an anthropologist.

This providing, by Margaret Mead, of a definitive answer to the problem that Benedict had identified as the fundamental question to which the labors of anthropology were directed, was, for the Boasians, the most heady of triumphs. Boas, in his foreword, had emphasized the painstaking nature of Mead's Samoan researches. Benedict, who had followed Mead's researches even more closely than had Boas, gave the same assurance. Adolescence, she wrote in the Journal of Philosophy, had been „an excellent choice as a test problem,“ both because conditions in American society had focused so much attention upon it and because it was „by definition tied up with a biological fact in human development.“ In studying this test problem Dr. Mead had, said Benedict, „learned to know intimately, in their own language, the girls of three villages,“ and had „made herself familiar with the minutiae of their civilization.“ And, through these meticulous inquiries, Dr. Mead had found that „it was precisely at adolescence that, for the Samoan girl, emotional stress is at a minimum.“ For Benedict, as for the rest of the Boasians, Coming of Age in Samoa was above all significant as an exemplification of „the enormously variable social determinants that fashion our flexible human nature,“ and a demonstration that the human animal was „unbelievably plastic.“ Cultural determinism had been proved to the very hilt.40

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