

[Leonard on Glazier, 'Anthropology and Radical Humanism: Native and African American Narratives and the Myth of Race'](#)

Review published on Monday, February 22, 2021

Jack Glazier. *Anthropology and Radical Humanism: Native and African American Narratives and the Myth of Race.* Michigan State University Press, 2020. 1 online resource. ISBN 978-1-61186-350-5.

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Commissioned by Eliah Bures

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55923>

Race and American Imperial Anthropology

Since Kathleen Gough first wrote of anthropology as the “handmaiden” of colonialism, anthropologists and historians have struggled to come to terms with the discipline’s early role in providing information on subjugated populations to imperial authorities.[1] Much of this attention has focused on British, French, and, to a lesser extent, German ethnographers, ethnologists, and anthropologists engaged in colonial social science. Generally viewed as an independent school, the American anthropologists who emerged under Franz Boas’s tutelage have escaped some of that criticism, perhaps due to the smaller scope of American overseas colonialism. Seeking to add to scholarly understanding of American anthropological engagement with the systemic racism that came from contact with Native Americans and African Americans, Jack Glazier has entered this fray with his work, *Anthropology and Radical Humanism*. Glazier centers his account on the career of Paul Radin, a student of Boas with a somewhat checkered and itinerant career in the early twentieth century. Constructed from a strong foundation of largely untapped primary material generated by Radin and his collaborators, the book serves as a useful overview of anti-racist efforts of Boas and Radin as they worked in a field largely shaped by the intellectual power of W. E. B. Du Bois and the luminaries attached to the Harlem Renaissance and related movements. In Glazier’s telling, Radin emerges as a crucial figure linking studies of Native American and African American social and religious practices to a wider movement to restore humanity to these long-oppressed groups. *Anthropology and Radical Humanism* provides a useful perspective on the fraught engagement of social science with institutionalized American racism in the early twentieth century while offering access to a new range of sources on African American religious practices, particularly among ex-slaves.

Glazier set his book amidst the tumult of twentieth-century American racism, finding the Boas school, best exemplified by Radin, as fellow travelers “sharing the methodological and interpretive goals of the black history movement” (p. 10). Linking Radin’s work among the Winnebago of Nebraska and Wisconsin with his brief time collecting ex-slave narratives, Glazier describes Radin’s belief in the “universal need to find meaning and psychological adjustment in their lives” among all of his research subjects (p. 15). Proceeding from a brief methodological and historiographic introduction, Glazier’s book includes five relatively brief chapters and a short conclusion. The first chapter centers

on Radin's background as a humanist, with a general discussion of his study of, and belief in, "native intellectuals" operating with "wide latitude" in "pre-industrial societies" (p. 27). Building from the Boasian emphasis on cultural relativity, Radin extolled the power of local context and individual agency among Native American societies in particular as representative of the great intellectual heights possible even when isolated from Western norms. As part of the larger salvage anthropological efforts of the Boas school, Radin took an avowedly synchronic or even atemporal approach to history, focusing instead on frozen moments for deep analysis rather than a consideration of longer-term forces or processes of change (p. 19). Glazier interrogates this tendency through the lens of biography, finding that Radin's use of the term "primitive" reflected "his own alienation from the most inhumane dimensions of modern life, including racism and worker exploitation" (p. 34).

Primitivity, in other words, provided an outlet for Radin's frustration with what he perceived as growing inequality across American society. Revealing the beauty of non-Western societies, therefore, might compel others to consider the great strength of Blacks and other disadvantaged groups.

While the psychological understanding of Radin certainly provides useful depth to his work, it falls short as a tool for analysis of anthropological practice. Comparisons with the nearly contemporaneous work of Marcel Griaule, for example, would add insight to the difficulties anthropologists faced when working through the cosmological memory of informants.[2] Most glaringly, Glazier missed an opportunity to engage the then-influential work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl on the "primitive mind," a term in the implicit racial hierarchy common to imperial Eurocentricity.[3] The lack of this critical apparatus leaves Glazier's book, particularly in this first chapter, somewhat hollow as a laudatory biography, with only tacit efforts to contextualize or break down Radin's work beyond its clear humanist intent in the United States.

Chapters 2 and 3 of Glazier's work, however, provide an excellent summative intellectual history of the anti-racist movements of the early twentieth century in the United States. Glazier's close attention to the links among Boas, Du Bois, sociologists Robert Park and Charles S. Johnson, and other Boas students such as Robert Lowie and Alfred Kroeber demonstrate the strong engagement of the nascent anthropological community with the anti-racist movements of the time. Glazier's work clearly places Boas, Radin, and their colleagues as "part of an anti-racist discipline that was waging a decisive campaign to free twentieth-century American anthropology from the moribund race science that had preceded it" (p. 83). The interdisciplinary approach of these scholars served as a corrective to white-authored historiography that presupposed racial and intellectual inferiority of African American and Native American populations alike. The relative newness of the discipline thus allowed its practitioners to adopt more of an activist approach, adding social scientific credibility to protest movements (p. 95). These chapters thus offer a strong introduction to the scholarly conversations that underpinned the growing movements for human rights in underrepresented American communities of the era.

Chapters 4 and 5, on the other hand, offer a source-rich portrayal of Radin's particular method for retrieving and describing the lived humanity of these African American and native communities. Offered thematically rather than chronologically—Radin's work with the Winnebago predated his work with ex-slave populations by decades but appears here as chapter 5—these sections provide superb detail useful to any understanding of anthropological practice among these American

pioneers. Chapter 4 is particularly rich in reproducing largely unseen accounts from ex-slaves collected by Radin and his graduate student collaborator, Andrew Polk Watson. Demonstrating the methodological power of oral sources, Radin and Watson acquired these tales from the last survivors of slavery in and around Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, during Radin's brief period of employment at that university. Both Radin and Glazier found powerful examples of moral resistance to dehumanization in these stories of religious conversion and practice among survivors, a "special form of American oral literature," in Radin's words (p. 134). If there is a critique of this section it comes again in the relatively quick analysis without deep consideration of important theoretical tools. Glazier could have profitably employed postcolonial and psychoanalytical theory, particularly the work of Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon, to bolster his analytical efforts to understand these slave narratives. Instead, he chose to let the narratives speak for themselves, and indeed these stories will prove of immense value to future scholars seeking to understand the slave experience.

Glazier does his best work in the concluding fifth chapter, analyzing Radin's methodology when studying among the Winnebago in the first decade of the twentieth century. Glazier effectively probes Radin's ethical failings as the anthropologist continued his synchronic approach and refused to accept the impact his own presence was having on native religious practices already in conflict. The struggle between more traditional Medicine Dance practitioners and the schismatic peyotists predated Radin's arrival, but his engagement with the leaders of the latter provided them with a protest outlet that went to the very core of Winnebago social life (pp. 166, 176-178). At the same time, Radin contradicted his own, repeated emphasis on the importance of individual humans as storytellers and subjects when he conflated accounts and identities among a number of his informants, eliding their personal information and mitigating the social agency they expressed through their accounts. Although he refused to create archetypal representatives of the group, as was the practice for a number of his peers, he nonetheless used their narratives to further his own analytical goals rather than as a pure representation of native thought (pp. 151-152). Importantly, Glazier also considers the gendered implications of Radin's heavy focus on male informants as he remained, at least at some level, a product of his times. Anthropological perspective has been an issue since the birth of the discipline, and Glazier is right to focus on the representational issues generated by its practitioners. American anthropologists in particular have been the subject of such inquiry in recent years, so Glazier's book links well to those discussions.

In considering the rise of the Boasian school of American anthropology, Glazier's book fits in a wider conversation on the practice of the emerging social science. Glazier places himself at the nexus of a generalized discussion among Lee Baker, Herbert Lewis, and Kamala Visweswaran on the racial inflections in Boas's work in particular.[4] However, their engagement with critical race concepts combined with postcolonial theory places them in a different context from the relatively straightforward presentation offered by Glazier. Instead, Glazier's efforts to demonstrate the wider connection of early American anthropologists to powerful movements advocating change in racial and gender norms puts him in conversation with the recent work of Charles King, along with the broader histories of anthropology by George Stocking.[5] King's view of the contributions of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, which are given little attention by Glazier, makes King's contribution more useful for introductory students in anthropology, particularly given its emphasis on the creation of analytical categories that remain important today. Stocking's approach aligns most comfortably with Glazier's work, as it provides a useful baseline for understanding the growth of and change to anthropological

practice.

Perhaps most importantly, I would place this work alongside the older but still powerful study by James Clifford of French missionary ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt.[6] Unlike Clifford, Glazier does not view Radin's work through the lens of colonial engagement, though many of the same forces of political and social control through race were at work in the American example. Clifford's biography, while sympathetic to its subject, adopted an internal view of the process of ethnography and the combination of religion, spirit, myth, and science in a potent brew. Glazier's work has recovered important voices in American anthropology's past but does not engage them as a microhistory of American imperial and racial engagement. His exposition of the reach of the anti-racist movement in the early twentieth-century United States is important and necessary, but it falls short of the demands of a fully contextualized intellectual biography.

Historians of anthropology and race in the United States would find great value in Glazier's thin volume. As mentioned above, the superb fourth and fifth chapters provide a wide array of evidence not frequently considered in conversations about race in the United States. Glazier's eminently readable prose allows a reader at the undergraduate level and above easy access to what can become difficult-to-comprehend subjects. Unfortunately, scholars hoping for a broad and detailed engagement with postcolonial theory in an American context will be disappointed, as the lack of theoretical engagement is the greatest hindrance to a wider consideration of the work. Nonetheless, the book has great promise as an introductory text for students new to critical race theory, the history of American social science generally, or historians of anthropology more specifically.

Notes

[1]. Kathleen Gough, "Anthropology and Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 19, no. 11 (April 1968): 12-27.

[2]. See, for example, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965 [1948]).

[3]. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York: Routledge, 2018 [1923]).

[4]. Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Herbert S. Lewis, "Boas, Darwin, Science, and Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 3 (2001): 381-406, and "The Passion of Franz Boas," *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 2 (2001): 447-67; Kamala Visweswaran, "Race and the Culture of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 1 (1998): 70-83.

[5]. Charles King, *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Anchor Books, 2020). For examples of Stocking's engagement with Boas and American anthropology, see *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968); and *Delimiting Anthropology: Occasional Inquiries and Reflections* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

[6]. *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Leonard on Glazier, 'Anthropology and Radical Humanism: Native and African American Narratives and the Myth of Race'*. H-Ideas. 02-22-2021.

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Citation: Douglas Leonard. Review of Glazier, Jack, *Anthropology and Radical Humanism: Native and African American Narratives and the Myth of Race*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. February, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55923>

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