The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research

By Anti Oligarch on October 31, 2010

by Derek Freeman
Summary-review by Dr Peter S. Cook

In 1928, in her best-selling, “classic scientific study” Coming of Age in Samoa, Margaret Mead reported that adolescents there experienced complete sexual freedom, without the phenomena associated with adolescence elsewhere. She declared that this exception, which she had hoped to find, established that human nature and behaviour is shaped entirely by culture, not biological inheritance. She and her colleagues then worked to establish this “cultural determinism” as the prevailing ideology in the social sciences.

In 1983, Derek Freeman showed that her account was seriously in error in many respects. He now documents how this happened. Having neglected her assigned study, Mead belatedly interrogated her two female companions about their sexual customs, and she was “comprehensively hoaxed”. Freeman says she then “unwittingly misinformed the entire anthropological establishment, as well as the intelligentsia at large”, so that for decades professors throughout the Western world, quoting Mead to support cultural determinism, misinformed their social science students about “an issue of fundamental human importance” – the nature of human nature.

When Freeman presented his case, rather than being lauded by the anthropological community, he was pilloried for criticising an icon. Now he presents decisive evidence including, finally, an account published in 1931 by Mead herself.

As one of the most eminent and influential social scientists, Mead’s flawed evidence was relevant to intellectual culture and the social sciences for much of this century. Areas adversely influenced by Mead’s misinformation included anthropology, psychology, Marxist ideology, post-modernist relativism, the sexual revolution, gender studies, feminism, childrearing, and childcare policies. Freeman’s book is a starting point for unravelling and rethinking the ramifications of Mead’s far-reaching but misinformed influence.

This epic drama by Derek Freeman, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University, will surely become a scientific classic. Many facets contribute to its appeal and significance, and reviewers have used a range of superlatives. Peter Munz, Emeritus Professor of history, at Victoria University, Wellington, says: “This is a remarkably readable and exemplary work of historical detection which proves that one of the 20th century’s most cherished pieces of anthropological knowledge is nothing more than a myth.” Richard Dawkins, of Oxford University, says: “It is the extraordinary influence that Mead’s Samoan thesis exerted over intellectual culture for much of this century that gives Derek Freeman’s detective story its unique fascination.”

Why was Margaret Mead so significant?

Margaret Mead Born in 1901, Margaret Mead was, for much of the 20th century, the world’s most eminent social scientist. Her 1928 book Coming of Age in Samoa, describing how adolescents there experienced complete sexual freedom without the problems of adolescence found elsewhere, became an all-time best seller. She depicted a low-stress, cooperative paradise. She had hoped to find a society of this kind, to support the ideology of Franz Boas, her supervisor. Together they declared that her evidence established that human nature starts as a tabula rasa – a clean slate which is shaped entirely by culture, not biological inheritance. Margaret Mead played a crucial role in making this cultural determinism the prevailing ideology in American anthropology and social sciences. Freeman has shown how Mead’s account of a Samoan sexual utopia was seriously in error in many ways, and was based on a hoax.

Although the ideology supported by her account was unscientific and untenable, its influence was far-reaching. It’s teaching that the newborn baby was undifferentiated raw material, ready to be moulded to any pattern, was welcomed by behavioural psychologists, seeming to legitimise the behaviourist childrearing advocated by the psychologist, J.B. Watson. His influential Psychological Care of the Infant and Child also appeared in 1928. He advocated relentless conditioning of the infant from birth, likening the parents’ task to that of the blacksmith shaping hot metal with hammers, though he cautioned that ”the blacksmith has all the advantage” because after a mistake he can begin again. With a child “every stroke, be it true or false, has its effect. The best we can do is to conceal, skilfully as we can, the defects of our shaping”. He believed children should be treated as young adults: “Never kiss or hug them, never let them sit in your lap”. Marxist utopians were likewise supported in their belief that, with no basic human nature to stand in their way, social conditioning would...
Mead's seemingly authoritative evidence encouraged sexual promiscuity. As antibiotics became available to control venereal disease, and pills could avert conception, the sexual revolution took off, until AIDS prompted second thoughts. Mead's work influenced gender studies, and the feminist childcare agenda, in denying biological influences even in the behaviour and emotions of mothers and infants, relied partly on her material. In considering human nature, behaviour and culture, the influences of genetic inheritance were "altogether irrelevant". To counter ethnocentrism, anthropology adopted the doctrine of cultural relativism, holding that there were no firm standpoints from which to appraise a culture. This relativism nourished "post-modernist" thinking, seeing everything as relative. Nothing is certain, anything-goes.

How did this momentous hoax come about?

To see how a hoax involving three 24-year-old women on a remote Samoan island in 1926 had such consequences, we must backtrack. Following publication of The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin in 1859, there was much debate about how evolutionary theory applied to humans. The relative influences of heredity and environment were heatedly argued in the nature-nurture debate, and some thinkers took extreme positions.

Franz Boas, who became Professor of Anthropology at New York's Columbia University from 1899, was born in Germany in 1858. By 1883 he had been converted to neo-Kantian philosophy, which argued that reality was a construct of the mind, and it led to Boas' life-long antagonism to evolutionary thought. (In an arctic expedition, while hungry for lack of food, and with outside temperatures at minus 40 degrees C, he had sat in his igloo studying Kant!)

Boas became powerfully convinced that human nature, feelings and behaviour were entirely determined by the social conditioning of culture, and he communicated this to generations of students, many of whom became leading figures in American anthropology.

In 1917 his followers decreed that human culture is "superorganic", thus "instigating a massive intellectual schism, proclaiming there was an abyss between cultural anthropology and evolutionary biology, an 'eternal chasm' that could not be bridged." "Boasian culturism was poised to become one of the leading ideologies of the twentieth century", and by the mid 1930's Boas had succeeded in "suppressing the classical theory of evolution among practically the entire group of leading American ethnologists".

Yet in 1924 evidence for this ideology was still lacking. Boas decided that it might be obtained by a study of heredity and environment in the behaviour of adolescent girls in a "primitive" society somewhere or other. One documented exception would make his case. Hoping that Samoa would provide it, he arranged for the brilliant and ambitious young Margaret Mead to have a National Research Council fellowship in the biological sciences for this specific purpose.

The hoax

Mead arrived in Samoa on 31st August 1925. Without telling Boas, and in breach of his specific instructions and the terms of her fellowship, she secretly lined up a major additional study for the Bishop Museum of Honolulu. After two months learning Samoan, she went to the islands of Manu'a in November 1925 to study adolescent girls. However, she was much more interested in the Bishop Museum project and repeatedly gave it priority. Thus diverted, and frustrated by many obstacles, including widespread devastation by a hurricane, she became acutely anxious that she would disappoint Boas with her lack of progress in studying the adolescent girls. Actually, she had already recorded the correct information from two Samoan informants, but it was not what she expected or wanted to hear.

And so, having taken a trip to the island of Ofu, far from the girls she was failing to study, she seized an opportunity on March 13, 1926, during a long walk, to solve her "problem" quickly. One of her two 24-year-old companions was a ceremonial virgin, and Mead, having concealed her marriage, had three times accepted the same high status. While knowing the great importance accorded to pre-marital virginity in Samoan society, but unaware that she was breaching Samoan etiquette, she resorted to suggestive interrogation of the two women about what sexual adventures they and other Samoan girls might really get up to at night. Surprised and embarrassed, they fell back on the Samoan custom of playful hoaxing, of which Mead was also unaware. After pinching each other, they told her the opposite of the truth, and jokingly agreed with whatever she suggested, adding suitable embellishments. She never asked whether this was seriously true, and they had no idea that she would tell the world.

Mead believed that, through behaving like a Samoan girl, the true underlying "cultural pattern" had now been secretly revealed to her. Without telling Boas how this transformation of her "problem" had come about, she wrote to him on March 14th saying she now had evidence for "the sort of thing" she thought he wanted, concluding: "I hope you'll be pleased." And indeed he was!

In an appendix, Freeman presents the text of ten revealing letters between Mead and Boas over the year July 1925 – July 1926. On January 5th 1926 Mead asked Boas: "If I simply write conclusions and use my cases as illustrative material will it be acceptable?" On March 18th she received Boas' agreement to this proposal! And so, with no further checking, she abandoned the systematic study for which she had her fellowship, and on which her conclusions were presumed to be based. It would have corrected her illusions, but it was never undertaken at all.
Having solved her “problem”, she decided to cut short her stay in Samoa, and leave as soon as possible to holiday in Europe. She now found time to write to her grandmother saying that she was leaving Samoa with a clear conscience, adding a story she had written about the faraway valley in rural Pennsylvania where she herself had come of age. She entitled it “The Conscientious Myth Maker”! Having achieved her scoop, she never made detailed inquiries into Samoan sexual behaviour again; nor did she return to Samoa, apart from a “sentimental five-day visit” in 1971, although in anthropological parliance she claimed it as “her country”.

Before embarking for Samoa in August 1925, she had posted a letter to her husband, Luther Cressman, saying “I’ll not leave you unless I find someone I love more”. When re-united with him in France in 1926, she sat on his knee and reminded him of that letter. She then said: “Well, I met someone aboard ship I love very much and I want to marry him”.

Cressman later recorded that as a young graduate, on being shown by a colleague “with chapter and verse, that a conclusion of hers was untenable, Mead’s defense would always be, ‘if it isn’t, it ought to be,’ to which she would add, ‘Well, what’s so bad about that?’” Freeman says she was much given to having hunches. She recorded one which involved her influential conclusions in Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935). She said that the most “bizarre” of these societies was the Tchambuli, whose “formulation of sex-attitudes contradicts our usual premises” (p.288). On March 21, 1933, she wrote from Tchambuli to Ruth Benedict, saying: “I’ve gotten the key to this culture from my angle — got it yesterday during hours of sitting on the floor in a house in mourning. Now it is straight sailing ahead, just a matter of working out all the ramifications of my hunch”. These “ramifications” in turn flowed into her Male and Female of 1949. Many such anecdotes sheds some light on how her fertile mind worked.

Mead’s Samoan myth takes off

In Europe, she checked her presentation with Ruth Benedict, and worked out the ramifications of her Samoan hunch, to harmonise with the “cultural pattern” which she believed had been secretly revealed to her. Conflicting evidence was ignored, re-interpreted, or rationalized as “deviant”. She fashioned a brilliantly seductive description, far removed from reality, of an idyllic, cooperative, easeful society with relaxed, low-key human relationships, where sexual promiscuity was a carefree, night-time recreation before, and sometimes after, marriage. To account for these enjoyable but casual relationships she described Samoan childrearing as leading to no close maternal bonding or nuclear family attachments, which was also untrue.

When she presented this version to Boas on her return to New York, he was so pleased with her conclusions in support of his views that he failed to check the evidence of her records. As her official supervisor, he should and could have seen the errors and contradictions in her Report. Instead he was “completely satisfied”, and his approval was sent to the National Research Council.

Now Boas and Mead proclaimed that this “research” established that human nature is shaped entirely by culture, not biological inheritance. With Ruth Benedict (her tutor and lover, who was later to write the influential text Patterns of Culture of 1934) they resolved to fight to promote cultural determinism with the “whole battery at their command”. Boas, in his 1928 Foreword to Mead’s Coming of Age in Samoa: a Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation, vouched for her book as the outcome of “a painstaking investigation”.

In an astonishing and salutary chapter, Freeman describes how “The Mythic Process” took off, and Mead’s book was soon accepted as a “careful scientific work”. She got it endorsed by Malinowski in London, and other eminent men followed suit. Havelock Ellis, quoting Mead, declared (quite erroneously) that “a whole field of neurotic possibility had been legislated out of existence” since Samoa had “no neurosis, no frigidity, no impotence”. On the basis of Mead’s “enlightening study” he advocated the adoption of sexual promiscuity by Americans.

Thus, Mead, read by millions of avid young intellectuals, redefined the tone and scope of the human sciences, and established in the western imagination an idyllic image of harmonious primitive societies. She later described it as her “classical research”, and it launched her career as one of the most acclaimed and influential women of her time. She became the most famous learned woman of her age, great pathfinder of personal sexual liberty, and ‘Mother to the World’ (according to Time magazine). In 1976 she became President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and her fame reached the heavens when a large impact crater on Venus was named after her. She died of cancer in 1978.

Jill Kerr Conway, in her 1994 introduction to extracts from Mead’s autobiography, extols “… Mead’s epoch-making Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935), which asserts the primacy of culture in gendered behavior, thereby predating the modern feminist interest in gender and culture by some thirty five years. Mead also anticipated the feminist critique of marriage and the Western preoccupation with heterosexual relationships by maintaining throughout her life concurrent erotic and emotional relationships with male and female partners… Mead published ten major works between 1928 and 1977, moving from studies of child rearing in the Pacific to the cultural and biological bases of gender, the nature of cultural change, the meaning of cultural pluralism, … race relations, and the origins of drug culture”.

Though aware that “her approach to her fieldwork” had been “savagely criticised, most notably by Derek Freeman” (1983), Conway claimed “no critic has been able to undermine the extent of Mead’s contribution to anthropology, her intellectual courage, and her willingness to tackle large subjects of major intellectual consequence for her own and succeeding generations. Her readiness to comment and her interest in all aspects of society made her something of a culture heroine for the English-speaking world in the post-second World war era.”

The denouement
But where was the truth in all this? In 1940, a young New Zealand student of anthropology, Derek Freeman, went to Samoa, expecting to confirm Mead’s findings. Over many years he gained an intimate understanding of Samoan society, very different from that which Mead had described. He found that her accounts of Samoan social rank, ethos and character, childrearing, family life, adolescence, delinquency, and sexual mores were all seriously in error. In 1983 he published, in Margaret Mead and Samoa, a systematic refutation of these errors, as he contrasted her account with his detailed evidence. He had discussed his findings with Mead in 1964, and they corresponded subsequently. She privately acknowledged that she had been found to be wrong, but she died before seeing the early draft which Freeman offered. She maintained that her account was true and unalterable, never realising she had been hoaxed. Even in 1976 she was still attributing the easy nature of Samoan life to freedom of sex.

The publication in 1983 of Freeman’s book was described as a “torpedo at the water-line” and “a seismic event” for American anthropologists. Yet, far from receiving approbation as a scientist whose evidence was correcting a seriously erroneous record, he was seen as attacking the doyen of anthropology, an American icon whose opinion was revered. It was unthinkable that her most famous book was in error. At first they were appalled. Then there was fury, and during the 82nd annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in November 1983, “in the barbaric faith that the scientific status of a proposition can be determined by a show of hands at a tribal get-together”, a formal motion denouncing Freeman’s refutation of Margaret Mead’s conclusions of 1928 as “unscientific” was put to the vote and passed unanimously!

Samoans had long suspected Mead must have been hoaxed, but exactly how she came to be so wrong remained a mystery. Freeman had given up hope of meeting any first-hand informants to shed light on this, but in November 1987, after arriving in Samoa to make a documentary film, he was astonished to be unexpectedly introduced to a dignified 86 year-old lady of rank who had been one of Mead’s two companions in 1926. She was in full possession of her faculties, and had returned to her home in Manu’a after living in Hawaii for many years. She gave sworn and filmed testimony, detailing the fateful hoax, as described above. The accuracy of her memory was later confirmed by rigorous testing.

Could this be documented?

Freeman says “…The point had been reached where there could be no avoiding this question: What, in fact, actually happened during Margaret Mead’s brief sojourn in the remote islands of Manu’a in the mid-1920s? For me, this question demanded systematic investigation. Issues of great anthropological significance were manifestly involved”. Gaining access to Mead’s records and masses of documents, he reconstructed a detailed chronology of events, and found Mead’s letter written to Boas on 14th March 1926, the day after the hoax.

For the 1996 premier of David Williamson’s play Heretic, which dramatised this story, Freeman’s 1983 book was re-issued as Margaret Mead and the Heretic: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth. In a new 8-page Foreword, quoting Sir Geoffrey Elton, Freeman said: “It is the historian’s duty to put myths in their proper place (which is in the discard) regardless of what some people may feel about it”.

Freeman continued:

“Moreover, we are dealing with one of the most remarkable events in the intellectual history of the twentieth century. Margaret Mead, the historical evidence demonstrates, was comprehensively hoaxed by her Samoan informants, and then, in her turn, by convincing Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict and others of the ‘genuineness’ of her account of Samoa, she unwittingly misled the entire anthropological establishment, as well as the intelligentsia at large, including such sharp-minded sceptics as Bertrand Russell and H.L. Mencken. That a Polynesian prank should have produced such a spectacular result in centres of higher learning throughout the western world is wonderfully comic. But behind the comedy there is a chastening reality. It is now apparent that for decade after decade in universities and college lecture rooms throughout the western world students were misinformed about an issue of fundamental importance by professors who, placing credence in Mead’s conclusion of 1928, had themselves become cognitively deluded.”

Martin Orans, an American professor of anthropology, after studying Mead’s field notes, but not the other relevant historical materials, concluded in 1996, as had Freeman, that Mead’s work in Samoa was both “profoundly unscientific” and “seriously flawed”. Yet, so great was his reluctance to believe Freeman’s historical analysis that he still argued that she could not possibly have been hoaxed. But this left only the unlikely alternative explanation that she had deliberately lied – a notion which Freeman (1999b) unhesitatingly rejects.

At last, any doubts that Mead was hoaxed have been decisively settled by Freeman’s unearthing of one more first-hand account. It is by Mead herself! She wrote that on the island of Ofu, on the occasion described above, her relationship with the two Samoan “girls” had become so close that she was able “receive their whispered confidences, and learn at the same time the answer to the scientists’ questions”. Mead published these revealing words in New York in 1931 in Life as a Samoan Girl in All Truth! The Record of Actual Adventures That Have Happened to Ten Women of Today. Freeman’s (1999b) refutation of Orans’ thesis has been accepted for publication in Current Anthropology.

Conclusion

In his 80s, Freeman has seen the Samoan controversy settled decisively in his favour. At a meeting of the American Association of
Anthropologists in December 1998, his new book was on display. Its significance will take time to digest. It concludes with a call for anthropologists to abandon pre-scientific, anti-evolutionary ideologies, and recognise the rapidly accumulating evidence of evolutionary biology. This shows that “all humans, belonging as they do to the same species, have the same phylogenetically given human nature, with their differing cultures having come into being during quite recent times, through the varying exercise of choice. Our biologically given capacity for choice is then of enormous human significance.” Nature and nurture interact, but we should never disregard our biological heritage, which is becoming more and more fully understood.

In 1983 (before any evidence of the hoax) Freeman wrote (p.292,):

“We are confronted in the case of Margaret Mead’s Samoan researches with an instructive example of how, as evidence is sought to substantiate a cherished doctrine, the deeply held beliefs of those involved may lead them unwittingly into error. The danger of such an outcome is inherent, it would seem, in the very process of belief formation...” ... “A crucial issue that arises from this historic case for the discipline of anthropology, which has tended to accept the reports of ethnographers as entirely empirical statements, is the extent to which other ethnographic accounts may have been distorted by doctrinal convictions, as well as the methodological question of how such distortion can best be avoided. These are no small problems.”

Boas and Mead were rightly driven by a sense of urgency to document pre-industrial societies before they were changed for ever by contact with Western influences (though missionaries had been in Samoa for a century, and Freeman was able to check his findings with their records). But to what extent did doctrinaire cultural determinism affect the validity of other observations by Mead and like-minded colleagues, if they were made and interpreted through the spectacles and perspectives of this ideology which deliberately excluded the evolutionary understandings which today are the foundation of all biological sciences? How many more Meadian “hunches” are waiting to be unravelled, if we ask such questions as: “Who said so? How did they know? Does it make sense? Is there a catch somewhere?” There is evidently need for much careful unravelling of the Boas-Mead legacy in the social sciences.

It is fitting that, before we move into the 21st Century, Freeman has provided the evidence to consign the myth supporting the ideology of cultural determinism to the dustbin of history. Mary Lefkowitz, Professor in the Humanities of Wellesley College, Massachusetts, concluded: “…Both anthropologists and everyone who cares about truth should regard Freeman (rather than Mead) as a ‘culture hero for our times’.

References


5. Freeman D. (1999a) The fateful hoaxing of Margaret Mead: a historical analysis of her Samoan research. Westview Press, Colorado, USA, (but see the paperback revised edition, containing the final 1931 confirmation by Mead herself, which Freeman had not yet discovered when the hardback first edition went to press!)

6. Freeman D. (1999b) Was Margaret Mead misled or did she mislead on Samoa? Forthcoming in Current Anthropology.


Acknowledgment

This article has been checked for accuracy by Derek Freeman, but responsibility for the text lies with the author.
Hello,

Are you aware that in 1983, the American Anthropological Association passed a motion declaring Freeman’s book, “Margaret Mead and Samoa,” to be “poorly written, unscientific, irresponsible, and misleading”? Freeman had waited until Mead died to publish his existing work, so she could not respond. All very bad form.

Oh so he did that intentionally?

I implore you to use your mind reading powers for good.

That, and the AAA has supported things that turned out to be wrong before, and vice versa- sometimes it’s just a case of being mistaken, and sometimes (as in this case) it’s just internal politics.
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Hollie Greig

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Hollie's Blog

For the recently awaken

“In fact, I point out that all the conspiracies in history - especially during the last 5000 years - are actually different aspects of the same conspiracy. Some people fixed on one aspect of the conspiracy, and say this is the problem, others say another thing, but the thing is all the conspirators work together. All the conspirators are part of the same operation. And this is what people find very reluctant.” - Eustace Mullins (2000)

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In 1999, Freeman published another book, The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research, including previously unavailable material. In his obituary in The New York Times, John Shaw stated that his thesis, though upsetting  Other research areas[edit]. In 1926, there was much debate about race and intelligence. Mead felt the methodologies involved in the experimental psychology research supporting arguments of racial superiority in intelligence were substantially flawed. In “The Methodology of Racial Testing: Its Significance for Sociology” Mead proposes that there are three problems with testing for racial differences in intelligence.


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