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Q1(c)

Historical Particularism and Franz Boas

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Historical particularism (Boas)

(b) Historical particularism (Boas); Diffusionism (British, German and American)

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on Historical Particularism and Franz Boas
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Historical particularism treats each culture as a unique historical product.

Boas rejected Morgan-Tylor unilinear stages.

Diffusion and invention must be proved, not assumed from similarity.

Race, language, and culture are independent.

Heirs used culture areas and texts; the risk is trait-listing.

Introduction

Historical particularism is Boas's refusal of one ladder of culture. Each people has a history of borrowing, invention, and environment that must be reconstructed on its own evidence.

Body**Boas's claim**

- **Franz Boas** attacked unilinear evolution of **Morgan** and **Tylor**. A similar trait need not mean the same stage.
- Diffusion, independent invention, and local meaning must be sorted by fieldwork, language, and museum series, as in his Northwest Coast and Baffin work.
- Culture is plural. Race, language, and culture do not travel as one package. That is the Boasian charter.

Method and heirs

- Intensive fieldwork, texts in the native language, and caution with grand laws defined the school.
- **Kroeber**, **Lowie**, **Sapir**, and **Benedict** carried particularism into culture areas, linguistics, and patterns.
- The limit is that history can become a pile of traits. Later process and power theories had to return.

Flow diagram

Boas -> Historical particularism
Historical particularism -> Fieldwork language museum
Historical particularism -> No unilinear ladder
Boas -> Race language culture split

Conclusion

Boas made anthropology a historical science of particular cultures. The method still blocks lazy evolutionism, if it does not refuse comparison altogether.

Facts & figures

Boas

Trained the first U.S. professional cohort and separated race from language and culture.

Kwakiutl and Inuit

Northwest Coast and Arctic fieldwork grounded his attack on armchair stages.

Culture area

Kroeber's mapping of trait clusters was a particularist, not a unilinear, comparison.

The Mind of Primitive Man

Boas's book denied that so-called primitive minds were biologically inferior.