# USING AND ABUSING THE WORKS OF THE ANCESTORS: MARGARET MEAD

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Because early-twentieth-century anthropologists worked under very different circumstances from those of anthropologists today, they have become easy to criticize and hard to use fruitfully. Finding the appropriate use of Margaret Mead's work today is a goal she would have felt at home with. Criticism and correction are essential, but opportunistic uses of Mead's work, legacy, and persona, like the attack by Derek Freeman that made him famous, are essentially wasteful and exploitative. By focusing attention on Mead's earliest work, Freeman obscured her lifelong contribution and undermined concepts she helped embed in American thinking, like the indispensable (if vague) concept of culture, the importance of learning and environment, and the holistic approach to patterns of human adaptation, concepts under attack today. In terms of legacy, she saw her field notes as the most valuable part of her work, but perhaps the most important example she set was her own development over time.

IT IS AN HONOR to contribute to this volume, especially as I am vividly aware that others know much more about the social anthropology of Oceania than I do. All of us in this profession, however, share the sense of how extraordinarily fertile Oceania has been in terms of the development of anthropological theory and method. These archipelagos—and the complex topography of the larger ones—have allowed so many separate cultures to flourish, exploring variations on overlapping themes, that they have been in many ways the Galapagos Islands for all our thinking about cultural variation. The work done in Oceania provides a kind of bedrock for what anthropologists do in other places and for the ways of thinking they make available outside of the profession. The work done by my mother, Margaret Mead, on seven differ-

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ent cultures in the South Pacific, with the vivid contrasts it contributed to her thinking, is also part of the background against which anthropologists work, wherever they may be on the planet, and it was the starting place for all her thinking about other issues.

Looking at Oceania today, there is more continuity in the cultures of the area than the ethnographers of Mead's generation expected. When Mead ended more than two decades of fieldwork, with World War II already shadowing the Pacific, she expected total disruption. Salvage anthropologists of her generation were concerned with the loss of preliterate cultures everywhere in the world. Ruth Benedict presented anthropology to Mead as an urgent task that had to be done quickly (Mead 1972:122). Today we are all aware that these cultures are not as fragile as anthropologists thought and aware also of the constant tides of change lurking behind descriptions written in the ethnographic present. The part of Samoa Mead studied was already changing by the time of her first field trip. When she went back to visit she was delighted to see again what she remembered as an appealing and harmonious culture in spite of all the outside influences, though complicated and stressful in new ways.

Nevertheless, we are aware of the huge change that has taken place, the need to understand ongoing change, and the need to have a baseline in order to understand that change. The records left by earlier anthropologists, who felt they were so much under the gun of culture loss, are an irreplaceable source for ongoing understanding. From the 1950s on, Mead's work focused increasingly on the question of change, replacing the question of how a newborn infant grows up to become culturally Samoan or Manus with the question of what it might mean to be Samoan or Manus as part of a global community.

In speaking about, among other things, the uses of Margaret Mead, I want to make it very clear that she thought in those terms herself. In the 1960s and 1970s, when my husband and I were living and working in the Philippines and later in Iran, both of us with urban jobs and only partially involved in research, my mother used to descend on us in the course of her travels. She'd telephone to say she was coming, saying, "Now, I want you kids to use me." Usefulness remains key to the many roles she played and the choices she made. She meant us to take the occasion of her visit to move forward in our work. For instance, we might arrange for her to give a speech and brief her on what we thought needed to be said to that audience at that time. Then she would pick our brains and give our suggestions her own twist. Or we might give a reception for her and invite people who might not turn out for us but would for her.

Similarly, when Mead retired as curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, she encouraged the museum to

set up a Margaret Mead Fund to strengthen the Department of Ethnology. What she said was, "The public won't remember me in five years. If you're going to get any mileage out of my name, you'd better do it quickly." Some two decades have passed since her death, and I think we can see both truth and error in her words, and that both use and abuse continue.

Mead had a major commitment to communicating with the public. She appeared on talk shows and wrote for *Redbook* magazine, putting most of the income into the Institute for Intercultural Studies to support continuing work. She felt it was of first importance that thoughtful Americans should understand the key ideas of anthropology in preparation for an increasing engagement in world affairs in both war and peace. Clearly she relished fame, but she felt that fame brought responsibilities. In her public persona it was as if she spoke right to the frontier of what her audience was ready to learn, which gave her thinking a quality of evanescence, quickly metabolized into the familiar. Many of those who heard her speak had the experience of thinking: "That was brilliant! I never thought of that." But then somehow, after about a week, they would begin to feel as if they had always known whatever it was. For many of the students she worked with most closely, her ideas went into their dissertations as if the students had thought of them themselves, or perhaps had always known them, because they had been so fully absorbed. This was no accident, for what she said was firmly based on an understanding of the thoughtways of those she addressed, and she carefully avoided the obscure and distancing rhetoric so often preferred by intellectuals and academics. This clarity was facilitated in speaking to American audiences by the fact that Mead did not feel alienated from her own culture as so many of us do. For all these reasons, there is a very real sense in which much of what Mead had to say has been absorbed both in the profession and in American society.

A comparison is helpful. The work of my father, Gregory Bateson, has never become common sense and never been fully absorbed by the profession. His way of thinking, even in the very early work that is best known (G. Bateson 1936), pulls away from familiar assumptions, and later in his career he shared his own unresolved intellectual struggle by falling back on enigmatic and even poetic modes of expression. Mead seems too easy; Bateson seems too difficult, though not in the ways that the academy prefers. But Bateson is more accessible today than he was thirty years ago, while Mead's writings reward rereading with nuggets barely noticed the first time around.

Unfortunately, this is only part of the ongoing story of Mead's intellectual legacy. The publicity given to Derek Freeman's attack (1983) on *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead [1928] 2001), begun after her death and unremitting until his own in 2001, has left the public feeling that all of her work was

compromised. Nevertheless, much of her influence has remained at an unconscious or unattributed level. After the original sensation, anthropologists gradually and skillfully came to her defense, too late to interest the media (see, for example, Côté and Shankman, this volume, 60–73 and 46–59). But we have largely allowed Freeman to suggest that *Coming of Age in Samoa* was both central and typical of Mead's work, rather than an early chapter. It is as if we were always talking about a small part of Mead, her left toe perhaps, a fragment of what she represented and achieved. The entire discussion often seems to be about Samoa and not only about Samoa but about adolescent sex in Samoa, with her descriptions paraphrased and distorted in Freeman's account (see Shankman and McDowell, both in this volume, 46–59 and 4–18; also McDowell 1984).

There are other opportunistic uses of Mead. One of the ways, particularly in this country, that people achieve a sort of derivative attention for themselves is by attacking a famous person. There is particular relish to be had in attacking a high-achieving woman, especially with a snigger about sex. But Mead is not only an opportunistic target, she is a surrogate target. If, like Derek Freeman, you happen to dislike virtually all of American cultural anthropology, you can use Mead as your "hook." You can get a book published if you put Margaret Mead in the title. Anthropologists were slow to realize how much of Freeman's attack on Mead was an attack on them, on their work, and on the principles of the discipline in which they had been trained. Many colleagues gloated. Used as a target, Mead has undoubtedly been a surrogate for others as well, some of them probably outside of anthropology and unidentified to us. One wonders if, in these attacks, Mead was also a surrogate for some other female figure in the past of the attacker, which may explain a certain obsessive tone (see Côté, this volume, 60–73).

It is common to use historical figures to represent the values that underlie an emerging understanding of history or as targets for criticism to dramatize flaws that still exist. This may be frustrating to scholars but is standard in both oral and written traditions, as complex and multifaceted figures are mythologized and simplified—even caricatured—in teaching the next generation. There is also a certain intellectual laziness that turns up in classrooms and textbooks, where we use the names of individuals as tags for oversimplified positions (like "absolute cultural determinism," an intellectual impossibility!). This means losing track of the complexity of ideas, the value and range of the work, and the many thinkers who contributed to it (see also Guddemi and Sullivan, this volume, 106–127 and 91–105). The strategy of label and dismiss is convenient but wasteful. There is another and more constructive sense in which each of us can use Mead, with caution, for what we wish to develop or to change about ourselves. When we criticize someone from the

past, it is a way of framing what we intend to do differently. We can look at someone's work and both critique it and learn from it, and this is after all the essential process of science. Any thoughtful account of a mentor or parent can be expected to contain a measure of ambivalence, the ground of further growth. We also look at our own past work and benefit both from what we still affirm and from what we need to revise. Mead was not an ideal parent, and I have followed her in some things and done others differently. Yet I and younger Americans have benefited from what Mead learned in Samoa, New Guinea, and Bali, some of which was passed on through her writings and her influence on Benjamin Spock (M. C. Bateson 1984:29).

Changing times have also given us new ethical insights into the relationships that surround and undergird our work, with new concepts of cultural property and informed consent. Recently I have heard the term "presentism" used to refer to a form of bigotry that arises when we project the standards of the present on the past, editing the past instead of inventing the future. A relatively trivial example of this problem is that at the beginning of her career, Mead, like her contemporaries, routinely used the term "primitive" and sometimes the term "savages." By the end of her career, she, with increasing consistency, spoke of "preliterate peoples" rather than of "primitive peoples," and now the term "indigenous peoples" is in fashion. Surely all of us have modified our vocabulary, partly because it's trendy but partly because we have developed significant new kinds of sensitivity in the way we speak and write, even though this has introduced some absurdities. But it is very important, when you read a document from the 1920s, to interpret and judge it in that context. The failure to do so is a form of presentism. For example, the proportion of sexually active teenagers is higher in the United States today than it was when Mead was writing, higher than it was among the Samoan girls she was writing about. Part of the problem is that reading the reviews from that time today suggests that *Coming of Age in Samoa* is a lot sexier than it is.

The work of an ethnographer is too multifaceted to be refuted simply, the way a laboratory hypothesis can be refuted by carefully designed experiments, but all ethnography requires correction and amplification when possible. Freeman's success was not as a refutation but as a distraction. None of us would be happy to see our lives reduced to the work we did in a two-year period in our early twenties, nor would we want to see our later efforts wasted. Instead, we think back and celebrate the fact that we have learned and would do it differently now. The issue is not just that Mead did important work after the 1920s. She did something else important to emulate. She learned from her experience. She developed. It is important to become aware, in the way we look at the historical figures of the disci-

pline, of the way they evolved. The picture of Mead that most people have is a snapshot that has no development. Icons, even those most treasured, become static.

Mead made one very fundamental change in all of her field trips after Samoa. She never again did fieldwork by herself. She, I believe, recognized that the lack of opportunity to discuss what she was seeing and thinking with a peer limited what she was able to see and think. My own belief is that what she saw and reported in Samoa was largely accurate, as Lowell Holmes affirms (1987), but incomplete, lopsided (see also Shankman, this volume, 46–59). There were aspects of Samoan culture she was not seeing and responding to. She never again went to the field for an extended period alone. Aware of the historical blind spots of male-dominated ethnography, she argued for male and female teams. When Reo Fortune preferred to insulate their work from each other, she deplored the waste (Mead 1972:205).

Mead believed strongly in returning to a field site. After World War II, she felt that her diachronic perspective would be wasted it she turned to new sites, and this awareness of double vision took her back to Manus to study change within one generation (Mead [1956] 2001:14–15). It sometimes happens, for all sorts of practical reasons, that an anthropologist makes one substantive field trip in early youth that provides the raw material for a dissertation and then mines those notes for articles for the rest of a professional career. But those who return to the field, having developed through time, see things differently. Experience at two different field sites or at the same site after a period of years offers even the solitary ethnographer something like the experience of teamwork, of dialog.

Surprisingly, Mead did not think her books were her most important work. What she felt was of absolute, long-term, irreplaceable importance was the body of original field notes, because other people would be able to use them and think new thoughts. The book that comes out about fieldwork is an interpretation of the notes. The notes are limited by what the individual ethnographer is able to notice, and we are all limited in that way, but our interpretations are even more limited and selective in what they include. With good notes (and Mead took very full notes), well preserved (and she typed huge quantities every night and made sure they were archived in the Library of Congress), there is more in the notes than we ourselves know. And because the societies we study are changing, no one can ever go back and see exactly the same things that we saw. Restudies are important precisely because anthropology is not a replicable science; and the most divergent restudies, like the works of Redfield (1930) and Lewis (1951) in Tepoztlán, are important not as refutations, but for the depth and perspective provided by two different points of view and two different personalities.

When Mead wrote about the time that she spent with my father in Bali and Iatmul, just before World War II, working with an intensity and excitement that boggles the mind (see Silverman, this volume), she commented that Gregory Bateson never came back to this kind of field work. "Instead, he has preferred to generate small stretches of data, based on tape recordings and films of interviews with schizophrenics and observations of octopuses in tanks, otters at the zoo, or dolphins in captivity, making records that are not in themselves priceless or timelessly valuable and that can be discarded when the thinking they were meant to underpin is done." (Mead 1972:238–239)

The point is not that some of these efforts fall outside of anthropology. The point is that she saw the films and tapes as insufficiently contextualized, so that although they were interesting to think with and led to new and important ideas, they were not invaluable as primary data, not "priceless or timelessly valuable."

In contrast, she impounded all the material from my father's New Guinea and Bali fieldwork in the Museum of Natural History along with material from several other anthropologists because, as she said, anthropologists lose things, especially when they are shoved out of their offices by universities. She made her offices at the museum a storehouse for the kind of data about human cultural diversity that she felt was absolutely irreplaceable. Since my own work in recent years is based on interviews and tape recordings that are also not fully contextualized in that sense, I have thought about this a good deal. I think it is true that the work that I do does not create a corpus of irreplaceable primary material; it is rather a transition stage in the development of thinking about the possible adaptations of individuals to the challenges of change (M. C. Bateson 1984).

As far as Mead was concerned, her ethnographic notes are her most important legacy. I have been working with publishers to get Mead's books and monographs reissued and available. New editions are less significant, however, than the use that other anthropologists have made of the notes (e.g., Errington and Gewertz 1989; McDowell 1991; Orans 1996; Silverman, this volume), writing new interpretations that can be juxtaposed to Mead's work and go beyond it. A steady stream of researchers has been going through the papers and photographs at the Library of Congress. There are some five hundred thousand items in the Mead Archives, the largest individual collection of papers in the library. It stands as a reminder of the critical importance of preserving field notes and accepting the vulnerability to reinterpretation as a responsibility that we all have to the future.

When Mead's books came out in new editions during her lifetime she wrote new prefaces, chronicling changing points of view, but she did not vio-

late the integrity of the texts by retrospective editing. Thus the books are primary data about the state of anthropology and her thinking at the time each was written. A long series of anthropology students who worked for Mead remember her insistence that everything should be dated, that, indeed, without a date it was impossible to interpret a note or a memo or an idea. This is the meaning of Mead's insistence on not modifying and rewriting texts. The texts themselves have a validity that is contextual, related to a moment in time, and if one starts editing them retrospectively, they are falsified.

We need to bring to the documents of the past the contextual sensitivity of archeologists. The books, properly dated and preserved as written, and the articles are important historical evidence of the development of our thinking and the contributions Mead may have made to it. Similarly, the many letters among her papers in the Library of Congress are valuable data about, for instance, the development of scientific and professional organizations in the United States over the half century of Mead's active career. With ever accelerating rates of change and increased longevity, Mead, unlike many of her critics, provides a useful example of someone seeing her own life and work through a lens of historical relativity.

There is another way in which Mead continues to be useful and important. As an individual, she stands in the public mind for ideas that she played a role in setting loose or establishing in American society. One of the most obvious of these is the concept of culture itself. Anthropologists have argued for more than half a century about what this term means, and every time I run into it in a press report or a piece of popular journalism, I wince a little—and it happens daily. We need to recognize and celebrate the fact that this little word is now indispensable in the encounters between peoples of different origins trying to work out ways of living together in one country. It is becoming even more indispensable as we are involved in more and more interactions with other peoples all over the world. The concept of "culture," as understood by Americans today, is sometimes a code word for class or race. But at the same time it is a way of emphasizing how much of human character and behavior is learned and could be learned differently.

Mead's work is linked to a cluster of key ideas in the fields of education and public policy, and her political views were congruent with her scientific work. We can use her as a vehicle for some of those ideas, especially since we have become cautious and inhibited in talking about them. Not only did she emphasize cultures as learned systems of human adaptation, she was also very clear that many of the associations people make with race and with sex are equally learned and that we can move forward from them. Aside from her career and the public success that made her a symbol of possible achievement for many young women, Mead's was a voice for feminism in an

early stage, before we had the vocabulary of social constructionism and the distinction between sex and gender. Mead's work also represents an affirmation of the way in which knowledge of other cultural traditions allows us to make positive choices for the future (see also Stover, this volume).

The last idea that I think we should associate with Mead and with other anthropologists of her generation—which we in anthropology seem to have lost—is the vision of anthropology as a holistic discipline. Back in those days, in the climate of salvage anthropology, when you went into a village as an ethnographer, you did not go as a specialist in medical anthropology, or in kinship systems, or in ceramics, or in house building, or in religion; you tried to record as much about every one of those subjects as possible. You often also wrote a grammar of the language, compiled a dictionary, and recorded myths and other texts because you might be the only person available to record them before they were lost. Now, all of this has changed. Anthropologists have gone back to the field and done a variety of restudies, mostly going on these later expeditions with much narrower specializations—having read the previous work, using the dictionary, the grammar, the maps, and the censuses—to look at particular questions. Mead's generation saw connections between things that we, in our more specialized mode, may miss. When I became involved in thinking about the Mead centennial, what I thought we most needed to use her for within the profession was as a reminder of anthropology as a holistic discipline. Her willingness to comment on virtually every aspect of American culture came out of the holistic curiosity of her fieldwork. In a compartmentalized and specialized society, this is a corrective badly needed. Whether through photography or systems theory or writing in an evocative literary style, Mead struggled for ways of showing and recording a fuller image of life than we are usually able to capture. We need to work on contemporary equivalents, framed in a reflexive mode, because change continues and much is lost.

That leads me to my final topic: the challenges for the future that await us in her work. The first of these tasks has to do with primary data, using hers, preserving and sharing our own; if every ethnographer adopted her attitude to field notes, she would be amply memorialized. There are also ideas that have never been picked up in the profession. We speak of Mead as a pioneer of visual anthropology. Yet, no one, as far as I know, has adopted the methodology developed in Bali and Iatmul of intensive photography (some fifty thousand photographs taken in Bali) as primary data that could support a new kind of detailed analysis (Bateson and Mead 1942; see also Sullivan 1999).

Another area where Mead developed original methods was in her work on "contemporary cultures," by which she meant those of literate, diverse,

industrialized societies. One of the two books that I felt most strongly about bringing back into circulation is *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Mead and Metraux [1953] 2000). This volume was put together as a manual for the research on contemporary cultures that grew out of Benedict's and Mead's work during World War II, work that Mead continued and elaborated after Benedict's death.

Today the notion of doing anthropological research in the United States or other large industrialized nations is a commonplace, but anthropologists still tend to study enclaves within those larger wholes—we are not, after all, interested in statistics so much as in direct observation and face-to-face contact. The methodologies developed to study the Axis powers and the countries occupied by them during World War II, countries that were inaccessible for research, still offer an approach to characterizing common cultural themes in nation-states with huge urban populations behind doors and walls, "at a distance" from the ethnographer. Following this interpretation of "distance," I organized a discussion group of Iranian and American social scientists working together, collecting and sharing interviews and life histories, drawing on personal experiences, going together to look at popular films, or discussing short stories or newspapers, and combining different angles of view. We were actually in Tehran but were using the techniques to think about a whole that was too complex and too inaccessible for any of us to tackle (M. C. Bateson et al. 1976). Interestingly enough, the methods we were using, which were developed during World War II, are echoed in what is now called cultural studies (Beeman 2000).

Mead had not one voice but many, and she expressed herself in different genres, sometimes shifting voices from chapter to chapter, as in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. There has been a call in the last few years for more anthropologists willing to address the public, as Mead did for so long, but here too we tend to polarize and oversimplify, as if writing well meant abandoning scholarship. Recently, I asked the campus audience of an all-day conference on Mead how many had read through at least one of her books. Virtually everyone had, which is already notable in our day of excerpts, CliffsNotes, and photocopying. Then I asked how many had read more than two, and the number dropped to a small fraction. Even among professional anthropologists (even, I am afraid, a few Oceanists), many seem to have read only Mead's trade books, skipping her technical monographs, such as the multivolume study *The Mountain Arapesh* (Mead [1938–1949] 2002); see also McDowell and Shankman, this volume). In order to reach the general public, it is important to master more than one style and to speak with an understanding of multiple contexts, for effective communication depends on ethnographic knowledge. Mead ([1942] 2001) saw all forms of participation

as opportunities for observation, including public speaking. Addressing these different audiences is a responsibility that, in a sense, the discipline was able to avoid for a great many years—the period from Benedict's death in 1948 until Mead's death in 1978. This withdrawal from speaking out on public issues was also affected by the beginning of the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism.

Mead's public voice depended on the conviction that anthropology is a science, although it must function without the rituals of the laboratory, and that we must distinguish what we know as scientists from our opinions as citizens. She gave a lot of thought over time to the relationship between science and public advocacy against the background of changing political trends. She was aware that it was only because she spent most of the 1930s in the field that she had not become heavily involved in the leftist politics of that era as her friends had. Joining advocacy groups or signing petitions could have reduced her effectiveness and made her a target in the McCarthy era, so she remained cautious about what she joined or signed. She criticized American Cold War policies when she felt her reasoning was grounded in specific research—arguing against the policy of containment, for instance, on the basis of research on Russia (Mead 1951; Beeman 2001). When anthropologists began to speak up again about public issues in the 1960s and 1970s, they tended to blur their activism and their professional experience. In contrast, Mead worked on the creation of the Scientists' Institute for Public Information (now defunct) to enable scientists to express their expertise—as distinct from their opinions as citizens—about such topics as atmospheric testing and fusion technology. Thus she opposed the passing of general resolutions against the Vietnam War by the American Anthropological Association (AAA), earning considerable hostility (di Leonardo 2001), for although she opposed the war as a citizen, she, like the majority of AAA members, could claim no particular expertise on the area. As for protest demonstrations, she never walked when she could sit—at a typewriter. She supported Jimmy Carter more by advice than by name recognition. On political issues, she thought like an applied anthropologist, approaching her audience in terms of their values instead of challenging them as simply wrong (see, for example, Mead [1942] 2001).

We are now at one of those moments, as in the mid- and late 1930s, when the climate of world opinion tilts in the direction of biological determinism and away from learned behavior. Mead quite deliberately emphasized the role of culture over biological givens in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* ([1935] 1963:xiii), although the biological givens survived in the title, because she did not want her work misread to reinforce racism. The new tilt toward biological determinism in our day, stimulated

by the Human Genome Project and a whole range of biomedical advances, should once again be a matter of concern for anthropologists, a moment for speaking out about what we know, not only about what we passionately believe. Mead has been vilified both by conservatives and by advocates of sociobiology. We are once again in a period where we have to remind our fellow citizens of the extraordinary and precious human capacity to learn. We have to remind them with all the evidence and eloquence we have lest there come a time when we become neglectful of the professional responsibility we have to teach—a responsibility fundamental to our understanding of what it is to be human.

## NOTES

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