

Review Essay

Freeman on Mead Again

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Derek Freeman, *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead. A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research*. Westview, Boulder, CO, 1999. Pp. xi+279. \$24.00.

In November 1983, the late Derek Freeman was anathematized by resolution of the 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) for a book that was, in the words of the motion, "poorly written, unscientific, irresponsible and misleading" (208-9). Needless to say, Freeman was not present and was given no official forum in which to answer nor was there any process of appeal. He was the victim, in the strictest sense, of a kangaroo court. The book in question was *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983), published by no less than Harvard University Press. In it, Freeman argued that Margaret Mead's description of Samoan adolescent sexual mores in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) was fundamentally flawed. Her picture of a period of free love under the palm trees for the unmarried Samoan adolescent was hard to reconcile with compelling direct evidence that Samoan society strongly emphasized premarital chastity, which was tested by a male relative. It also conflicted with the circumstantial evidence of the puritan Christianity to which Samoans adhered. So convinced was Mead that there were no adolescent sexual problems on Samoa, and that this resulted in enhanced sexual health, that in other publications she declared "the idea of forceful rape or of any sexual act to which both parties do not give themselves freely is completely foreign to the Samoan mind" (p. 187). Freeman's bloodhound instinct led him to examine court records, where he found evidence of an incidence of

rape twice that of mainland United States (in Western Samoa). In the book, he reports Mead recording two incidents of rape in her loose-leaf folder.

Freeman had put his doubts about Mead's 1928 findings to her directly and she had been nonplussed, wondering if perhaps what she had found was confined to that time and place, only to be different elsewhere and later. (Although Mead seems in 1925 to have been unaware of the large differences within the Polynesian "cultural area" between East and West.) Freeman, however, was not convinced by this suggestion. He too had done fieldwork in Samoa, was considerably more fluent in the language than was Mead, and like her, had been honored with a ceremonial rank. His expertise was as solid as was her good faith.

As Freeman admits in the present volume, he originally thought the issue was a purely scientific dispute between two scholars. Certainly, their own relations seem to bear that out. Freeman reports hesitating to publish and endeavoring to engage in further discussion with Mead, abortive only because she fell fatally ill. The result was that *Margaret Mead and Samoa* was received by an American anthropological community that revered Margaret Mead as standard bearer for the ideas of her teachers Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, and that included some Samoa specialists for whom her work was exemplary.

Freeman the scientist was in for a surprise. His scientific claim, his competence, his underlying motives, and his integrity were all subject to attack. Mead's partisans were a good deal more *ad hominem* than she was herself. As one reads about the resistance to Freeman's claims and the attempts at rebuttal, it becomes clear that he had stumbled on a scientific dispute that involved identity and associated emotions. Freeman viewed Mead's error as important since it functioned as a crucial test of the underlying Boasian view that the form adolescence takes is a cultural particular rather than a universal (or biological) developmental phase. Boas had himself selected for Mead the problem of adolescence in Samoa as a crucial test of his view that culture was almost the whole story. Samoa as presented by Margaret Mead was thus what Bacon called an instance of the fingerpost: it had decisively pointed American anthropology down the path of culture and away from the path of biology.

A rational reception of Freeman's 1983 book would have required of American anthropologists that they call into question not just the truth of the researches of Margaret Mead and the ideas of her teachers but their entire cultural and nurturist identity. This they utterly re-

fused to do—as the condemnatory resolution of the 1983 annual meeting of the AAA shows. Just as the annual meeting had been used 15 years before to issue pronouncements on the rights and wrongs of the Vietnam war, it was in 1983 encouraged to settle, by a show of hands, intellectual issues that were matters of evidence and reasoning, not majority opinion. Although not offered a hearing, Freeman was quite able to defend himself in print, did so vigorously, and found allies among anthropologists, though the latter were mostly of antipodean and British allegiance rather than North American. If his carefully argued responses did not shame his denouncers, they should have.

So much for background. The book under review could be looked at like this. If there is any rational core to all the disagreement over Mead, then perhaps the issues in question deserve a second look. If the issues are at all responsive to evidence, then perhaps more of it will suffice to achieve rational closure. Revisiting the matter and marshalling further evidence carries the risk, of course, that Freeman might have to concede error.

The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead pursues general and particular projects of revaluation. The general project is to bring together material that allows Freeman to reconstruct Mead's sojourn on Samoa almost day by day. He is also able to pinpoint just exactly what she was supposed to be doing and what she sometimes did instead. She was supposed to be concentrating on Samoan adolescence as a crucial test of Boasian culturalism—it was for this that Boas had secured her research grant. What she did instead was to give that project relatively short shrift while she collected material for a general ethnology of American Samoa, duly published in 1930 as a technical museum monograph, *Social Organization of Manu'a*. This was at most a bit naughty, a bit of a fast one—except that it set her up for the particular episode that is at the center of Freeman's reconstruction. Remarkably, in 1987, Freeman came across one of Mead's principal original informants about adolescent sex, still alive and clearheaded in her 80s. Informed that Mead had told the world about free love in Samoa, and mortified by her role in creating that impression, she swore a deposition to the effect that she and a friend had told Margaret Mead what they thought she wanted to hear. It was a prank not untypical of Samoan humor.

Earlier published versions of this story were greeted by the now-familiar ad hominem: such momentous matters cannot be decided by "octogenarian recollections" (p. 12). Standing alone, the

claim of hoax was just another piece of evidence, subject to standard critical scrutiny. Freeman does his best to test it. There were two separate interviews conducted by Samoan intermediaries; the informant was videotaped, her honesty and religious conscience were invoked by the use of the Bible for swearing. Freeman's direct tests are supplemented, however, by his meticulous reconstruction of Mead's movements. His "theory of the case," if you like, shows how Mead needed the information imparted by her two young women informants because she had not done the surveys and detailed interviewing of a sample of adolescent girls as she should have. She was aware that probing into sexual matters would require a lengthy confidence-building period with each informant, as well as cross checking. But by then Mead was eager to leave the field without taking time to do all this.

Freeman does not delve too far into Mead's reasons for her early departure—a particularly surprising decision, given that she initially contemplated extending her stay or returning. Freeman notes that she found life alone in the field very difficult. She declined to live in a native household on the practical grounds that the open structure would make the solitude necessary for work, not to mention privacy, impossible. She lived instead with fellow Americans but found colonial society stultifying in other ways. Hurricane damage during her stay made matters worse. What emerged was a strong urge to finish as soon as possible and return to her career (and a waiting husband).

There is nothing unworthy in any of this. Mead comes through Freeman's account as serious, spunky, and hardworking. She did collect lots of material very rapidly. She sought explicit permission from Boas to draw conclusions not fully backed by evidence. The most dubious action Freeman records is her deception of the Samoans: she allowed herself to be raised to the status of a ceremonial virgin on at least three occasions. This gave her good access to other young women. But it was gained at the expense of deceiving her hosts about her married and nonvirgin status. (A ceremonial virgin is a virgin with ceremonial status, not someone whose virginity is purely ceremonial.)

So Mead comes out of Freeman's reconstruction as a fine fieldworker whose skill and even brilliance led her to take on too much and to believe that she could complete two projects in less than the time budgeted for one. She thought she had decisive evidence from her female confidantes for her main project, and she rushed it

into print because she believed in the ideas and because she thought she had the correct answer to Boas's challenge.

Even for those readers who find the evidence for an out-and-out hoax difficult to swallow, Freeman's reconstruction of Mead's research progress—from letters, field notes, and diary—shows that Mead did not dig deep enough. Even if what her informants told her was true of their circle at that time, there was need to map its extent, and there was contradictory evidence (the semipublic testing of the virginity of brides; the strong emphasis on premarital chastity; the chaperoning of young women) with which it needed to be reconciled. Making all these concessions, the verdict on whether there was premarital free love in Mead's Samoa is, at a minimum, not proven; at a maximum, highly doubtful.

The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead is clearly and enthrallingly written (at least for those who follow these things) and makes a good case for Boas, Benedict, and Mead's having fostered a decisive wrong turn in American anthropology. Whether there is any hope of rationality and a scientific attitude being reestablished in that politicized and postmodernized field is, however, moot.

I have only one small caveat about *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead*. *Margaret Mead and Samoa* was, inter alia, a study in scientific method. In particular, Freeman consciously employed Popper's emphasis on falsification as a way to scientific progress. Refuting Mead created intellectual space for competing hypotheses on the relation of nature and nurture, especially those who view nurture as only one of the determinants of social behavior. Discussion of philosophy of science is almost absent from *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead* (though John Ziman and C. S. Pierce are invoked). Whether that was the conscious choice of the author or the wish of the publisher (Westview having replaced Harvard), it is, in my view, a striking absence. Freeman's view in the first of his two books on Mead was correct: a contributing reason why American anthropology took the wrong turn was the hegemony of a false empiricist/verificationist philosophy of science. That false philosophy of science became part of culturalism, and undermining it is part of the project of bringing culturalism down. Freeman's own reception is evidence of this. The shockingly poor level of argumentation among his critics, the inability to distinguish myth from fact, idea from advocate, are typical of what one might call "disappointed positivists": verified facts being unobtainable, they conclude there are no facts. Freeman's critique was treated as an assertion of a different cultural perspective, itself

resting on its own structure of myth. Such intellectual nihilism needs both specific and all-around critique for the benefit of a new generational cohort and the slim hope that it will want to rebuild the subject as a science.

REFERENCES

- Freeman, Derek. 1983. *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mead, Margaret. 1928. *Coming of age in Samoa*. New York: William Morrow.