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'primitive mentality' in selected works of
Franz Boas and Lucien Levy-Bruhl**

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A critical study in concept formation: conceptualizations of 'primitive thought' and 'primitive mentality' in selected works of Franz Boas and Lucien Levy-Bruhl¹

Vineeta Sinha

Introduction

The effort to understand concepts, their location in various disciplined settings and the process by which they are constructed have been long-standing central concerns in philosophy (Bogdan 1989, Burge 1993, Peacocke 1992, Weitz 1977, 1988) and in the field of the philosophy of the social sciences (Pawlowski 1980, Rudner 1966). A comparative scrutiny of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology over time reveals differential attention to epistemological, methodological and conceptual issues amongst its practitioners. The sociological literature on the subject is substantial (Burger 1987, Drysdale 1996, Outhwaite 1983, Ritzer 1988) and debates and discussions of meta-theoretical and methodological issues have had a legitimate space in the discipline since at least the 1950s (Hempel 1952a, 1952b, Gellner 1970, McKinney 1957, Schutz 1970). By and large anthropologists to-date have not prioritized meta-theoretical dimensions of their work. Routinely, they have selected and both positively emphasized and critiqued the empirical, ethnographic and comparative cross-cultural nature of the discipline.

The perception of 'crisis' within anthropology and questions about its future are by no means new speculations. Such concerns have been current amongst its practitioners since the 1960s (Banaji 1970, Berreman 1968, Gough 1968, Jarvis 1964, Hymes 1974, Maquet 1964). Clearly, anthropologists have been self-reflexive and actively engaged both its past and its present in an effort to re-think, re-shape and reformulate the discipline (Fox 1991). The critique of anthropology to-date has been launched from a variety of positions and the literature on this is voluminous. The intense self-introspection and scrutiny have identified the following problematics in anthropology: the role of colonial relations in framing the field of anthropology and the subsequent production of anthropological knowledge (Appadurai 1986, Asad 1973, Gough 1968, Said 1989, Stocking 1991), the exoticisation of the discipline (Friedman 1987, Said 1979), the paucity of sustained and integrated and theoretical formulations in the field (Leach 1961, Barret 1984), the politics of fieldwork (Harrison 1991), the problems of representation emanating from ethnographic encounters (Fabian 1990, Narayan 1993, Said 1989) and the problem of agency in the production of writing and texts (Marcus & Fischer 1986, Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Given the centrality of fieldwork in anthropology, ethnographic methods², techniques and experiences have also by now received considerable critical attention (Raybeck 1992). However, this gaze has yet to extend to epistemological and methodological issues amongst anthropologists who have consequently been less concerned explicitly with conceptual and meta-theoretical issues. In fact, in my view most social science theorists are not explicit about the methodology by which they arrive at specific concepts in their writings. Yet, there is most of the time, a particular logic, a set of procedures and assumptions that shape conceptual formulations. Perhaps it has been the practice amongst anthropologists that this reasoning remains embedded and implicit in their work. Until fairly recently, this had indeed been the case with methodological issues in anthropological writings.

I argue in this paper that it is indeed important for readers of social science texts to recognize that there are underlying epistemological and methodological positions within these writings, even if this logic is not articulated by the author. Further an attention to these premises is consequential in allowing a procedure for gauging the methodological rigour and conceptual coherence of theoretical formulations advanced/proposed.

In this paper, using as examples, relevant writings of Franz Boas and Lucien Levy-Bruhl, I demonstrate that this embedded logic can be abstracted and derived from a close reading of specific texts. A comparison of the reasoning by which Boas and Levy-Bruhl arrived at their respective conceptualizations of ‘primitive thought and ‘primitive mentality’ has been instructive for me. At an obvious level, these two persona are brought together by their substantive writings on the workings of the human mind amongst different groups of humans, although their motivations for this may have been quite varied. My own selection of these two theorists is not inspired by my interest in the content of their writings vis-à-vis the nature of human thought processes--primitive or otherwise. Rather, the corpus for this paper has been constructed with a view to articulating the *process* by which ideas are developed into concepts and subsequently integrated to formulate theories.

Introducing Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Franz Boas

As a means of locating the theories of these two authors, I offer very brief biographical remarks about them, in addition to pointing out their intellectual and philosophical leanings. I argue that a comparative project such as this is indeed legitimate, despite the rather different intellectual backgrounds, academic orientations, philosophical traditions and political agendas (or lack of) in which Boas and Levy-Bruhl are embedded.

Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939), a French scholar turned to the study of sociology of thought (Horton 1983:250) after having accomplished himself as a philosopher. Levy-Bruhl did not consider himself a sociologist but was obviously influenced by the ideas of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. The crux of his theory of primitive thought are contained in two books, *How Natives Think* (1928) and *Primitive Mentality* (1923); he wrote three other books which serve to complement, restate and clarify his earlier theorising. However in a series of notes that were published posthumously in 1939, Levy-Bruhl became his own best critic (Malefijt 1974:191), restating his earlier interpretations of primitive thought. Ironically, Levy-Bruhl is probably remembered today for the controversial stand he took vis-à-vis the status of primitive thinking and cultures, in anthropological studies in the early twentieth century. Perhaps there are many who would not even grant him the status of an 'anthropologist', given his affiliations with philosophy, his lack of training in anthropology and the fact that he was a mere 'armchair theorist'.

In many ways Boas' professional career presents a stark contrast to that of Levy-Bruhl. Franz Boas (1858–1942) came to anthropology via the natural sciences, specifically physics and mathematics, and then through geography. This early positivist and empiricist influence is very much discernible in much of Boas' anthropological writing. Being interested in geography he planned an expedition to the Arctic in 1883–84 and became interested in ethnological research among the Eskimo (Lesser 1981:2). During his academic career, Boas was involved in editorial, administrative and teaching duties in various American universities and museums.

Constructing the corpus of data for this paper

The corpus of data for this paper is constituted by Levy-Bruhl's *How Natives Think* (1926) and *Primitive Mentality* (1923), (the author intends for these two volumes to be read as complementing one another) and Boas' *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911). This reading is further contextualised within the larger corpus of Boas' and Levy-Bruhl's writings. For Lucien Levy-Bruhl, I looked at these writings: *The Soul of the Primitive* (1928), *Primitives and the Supernatural* (1935), *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality* (1949). From the volume of original writings by Franz Boas, the following were selected: *The limitations of the Comparative Method in Anthropology* (1896), *Some Problems of Methodology in the Social Sciences* (1930), *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1928), *The aims of Anthropology Research* (1932), *General Anthropology* (1938), *Biological Premises* (1938), *Race* (1938), *Language* (1938), *Mythology and Folklore* (1938).

In addition I also pay attention to select secondary material in the form of commentaries on the works of these two authors. Interestingly, the volume of material written on Boas contrasts sharply with the obscure references made to Levy-Bruhl by subsequent generations of anthropologists. There are, of course, social scientists who have re-evaluated Levy-Bruhl's works more positively in recent years.³ That Boas occupies an uncontested place in the annals of American anthropology cannot be disputed. Levy-Bruhl's writings have instead 'met with such great neglect and derision among English anthropologists' (Evans-Pritchard 1981:20) although social scientists and philosophers in France and Germany have been attentive to his ideas. To my mind this also has implications for the impact (or lack of) that Boas' and Levy-Bruhl's ideas are *perceived* to have had on the development of anthropological thought, proudly acknowledged in the case of former and often criticized negatively (Littleton 1985) and mostly ignored in the case of the latter.

Levy-Bruhl, the French philosopher, was never part of mainstream anthropological theorising, in Britain, France or the United States. His contributions to the development of anthropological thought are impossible to gauge directly and explicitly, but this is far from saying that he has not been instrumental in stimulating certain debates in the discipline.⁴ Very few anthropologists have embraced Levy-Bruhl as a teacher whereas one can name numerous anthropologists who claim to be Boas' disciples. Boas' privileged position as the founding father of American anthropology aside, I argue and demonstrate in this paper that his theorising about such issues as 'race', 'primitive mentality' and 'culture' (as contained in *The Mind of Primitive Man*) reveal many contradictions and inconsistencies. Levy-Bruhl's theorising, (in *How Natives Think* and *Primitive Mentality*) on the other hand, is somewhat less problematic in that his assumptions are explicitly stated, his argument clear and his deductions 'logical' and 'coherent', even if one does not agree with his conclusions.⁵

Although I have constructed a corpus for making generalised statements about the nature of theorising about 'primitive mentality' and so deal with Boas and Levy-Bruhl in one category, it is however important to remember that these authors are distinctive in their approach to their research problem. Thus at various points in the discussion I pay attention to specific problematics pertaining to each of the authors. The rest of the paper proceeds as such: I first abstract their conceptualisations of thought processes among 'primitive' and 'civilised' groups, explicate the logic and embedded assumptions in the two styles of theorising and then subject these to an assessment.

Conceptualising thought processes among 'primitive' and 'civilised' groups

How do Boas and Levy-Bruhl conceptualise/ theorise 'human thought' in general and 'primitive' and 'civilised' mentality, in particular? This question is central to the project at hand and I begin with Boas' conceptualization.

Boas is attentive to human thought processes and in particular 'mental traits' of 'primitive' and 'civilised' peoples in order to get at his broader interest in articulating the relationship between race and culture, specifically in relation to the problem of multi-ethnicity in the United States of America. Boas does not appear to have been interested specifically in conceptualising human thought in itself, or the ways in which this is expressed in 'primitive' and 'civilised' groups. To the end that he conceptualises 'workings of the mind', it is to enable him to theorise the relationship between race and culture. As such in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Boas does not try to characterise the nature⁶ of 'primitive mentality' or 'civilised mentality', although he discusses briefly first, 'fundamental' or 'essential mental traits', and then certainly at length the distinguishing features of the two types of thought processes. This is stylistically similar to Levy-Bruhl: the method of trying to avoid direct definitions and check lists of a concept (not always successfully) and to offer instead, types/varieties within a concept, say human thought processes, and to establish points of *distinction* and *departure* between them, primarily in *essentialist* terms.

Therefore, Boas discusses very generally the essential features that characterise 'primitive' and 'civilised' mentality and the corresponding cultures. For example, 'primitive culture', according to Boas is characterised by 'emotional associations', 'conservatism', 'resistance to change' and the 'social associations of sense-impressions and activities' (Boas 1911, 239-243). Although Boas states categorically that there is no relation between mental ability and culture, he unwittingly gives us sufficient evidence that does in fact see (or perhaps more accurately, lets the reader see) such a relationship. In the spirit of scientific enquiry Boas plays the game of attempting to establish causality. For this he identifies several variables (heredity, social and natural environment, race, mental traits, culture); operating within a 'scientific' framework, he then methodically and meticulously 'tests' hypothetical casual relationships (mainly drawn, he says, from currently-held prejudices and stereotypes) between the mentioned variables, in light of scientific evidence from biology and psychology. Based on the results of these 'tests', Boas concludes rather neatly and unproblematically the following:

that there is no relationship between cultural achievement and mental ability;

that environment has an important effect on the anatomical structure and physiological functions of man and that differences in type and action between primitive and civilised groups must be expected;

that heredity determines all the most fundamental features of each race and type of man;

that there is no relationship between mental traits and heredity;

that language does not explain differences in mental status;

and most importantly that there is no relationship between race and culture.

By ‘demonstrating’ that race (and hence biological and organic factors) does not influence mental ability, Boas concludes that ‘primitive mentality’, although different from that of ‘civilised’ groups (not *races*) is influenced instead by what he labels *environmental* factors. As I will show later, at various points, there are wide gaps between the explicit agenda stated by Boas and the end result he states he has obtained (within the framework of *his own* reasoning).

In contrast to Boas’ position, Levy-Bruhl explicitly rejects the notion of the ‘psychic unity of mankind’. From the very beginning, Levy-Bruhl asserts that it is erroneous to assume that the mind of the ‘primitive’ works like that of ‘civilised’ man (Levy-Bruhl 1926:43). He states that the two types of thinking are diametrically opposed and that any ‘objective’ study of ‘primitive mentality’ must begin with this recognition. In the absence of the latter we would end up labelling ‘primitive thought’ as a childish, cruder version of ‘civilised thought processes’. Littleton (1985) characterises Levy-Bruhl’s position as that of a ‘cognitive relativist’. Levy-Bruhl is concerned with several inter-related issues and he states his aim as such:

I shall endeavour to construct, if not a type, at any rate an *emsemble of characteristics* which are common to a group of neighbouring types, and in this way to define *the essential features of the mentality peculiar to undeveloped peoples* (Levy-Bruhl 1926, 29, Italics mine).

Levy-Bruhl tries to articulate the ‘essential dissimilarities’ between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilised’ mentalities. Significantly, for Levy-Bruhl the aim in these two books is to reconceptualise⁷ ‘primitive mentality’ and, more importantly its difference from ‘civilised mentality’ *explicitly* and in itself, and not as a means to theorising some other issue.

In contrast to Boas' position, Levy-Bruhl argues that 'primitive' man and 'civilised' man do think differently both in degree and in kind. He describes the patterns of thought of the latter as 'logically oriented' and that of the former as 'prelogical' or 'mystical', by which he means 'believing in invisible forces/beings' as if they were 'real'. Levy-Bruhl is at pains to emphasise that 'primitive mentality' is not incoherent, 'irrational' or 'illogical' (a position that he sees as setting him apart from the writings of Frazer and Tylor) but as one that has its own 'internal rationality'. He adds that these notions of 'logic', 'rationality' and 'coherence' are quite different from those of 'civilised mentality' (which is based on rationalistic philosophy and positive science). He says of 'prelogical' or 'mystical' mentality:

By *prelogical* we do not mean to assert that such a mentality constitutes a kind of antecedent stage, in point of time, to the birth of logical thought. Have there ever existed groups of humans or pre-human beings whose collective representations have not yet been subject to the laws of logic... At any rate, the mentality of these undeveloped peoples which, for want of a better term, I call *prelogical*, does not partake of that nature. It is not *antilogical*; it is not *alogical* either. By designating it 'prelogical' I merely wish to state that it does not bind itself down, as our thought does, to avoiding contradictions. It obeys the law of participation first and foremost ... It is often wholly indifferent to it and that makes it so hard to follow (Levy-Bruhl 1926:78, emphasis original).

Both Boas and Levy-Bruhl after characterising 'primitive' and 'civilised' mentalities thus include some discussion of 'inevitability' and 'desirability' of transition from the former to the latter mode of thought, although this is less so in Levy-Bruhl.

In Boas, an example of this is his conclusion on page 250 of his book, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911):

The change from primitive to civilised society includes a lessening of the number of the emotional associations, and an improvement of the traditional material that enters into our habitual mental operations.

On page 278 of the same book, he continues in the same mode:

I hope the discussions contained in these pages have shown that the data of anthropology teach us a greater tolerance of forms of civilisation different from our own, and that we should learn to look upon foreign races with greater sympathy, and with the conviction, that, as all races have contributed in the past to cultural progress in one way or another, so they will be capable of advancing the interests of mankind, if we are only willing to give them a fair opportunity.

Similarly Levy-Bruhl argues about the possibility of transition from 'primitive mentality' to 'higher mental types'. He says:

The process which is going on does not necessarily present itself as progressive, however...The weakening of the mystic preconnections and elements is not

always inevitable or continuous. The mentality of primitive peoples, even whilst becoming less impervious to the teaching of experience, long remains prelogical, and most of the ideas preserve a mystic imprint (page 379).

Levy-Bruhl seems to be struggling in this last chapter of the named book to articulate a relationship between 'mystical' and 'scientific' modes of thought. He appears not to want to see them as mutually exclusive, casting doubts on his earlier assertion that the two modes of thought are diametrically opposed he ends up saying:

Understanding, properly so called, tends towards logical unity and proclaims its necessity; but as a matter of fact our mental activity is both rational and irrational. The prelogical and the mystic are co-existent with the logical (page 386).

This last statement of Levy-Bruhl's, I think leads to a stronger conceptualisation as compared to Boas' neat and separate typologies of the 'primitive' and the 'civilised'. With some understanding of Boas' and Levy-Bruhl's position on 'primitive' and 'civilised' mentality, I turn now to the question of how these two authors arrive at the conclusions that they do. I do this by looking at the research questions formulated and the answers offered, and most importantly, by asking if the stated questions *are in fact answered*. Very often in reading theories one comes to the conclusion that the theorists end up addressing issues and questions *other than* the ones stated as being important at the *start* of the inquiry: in other words there is no match between the stated objective and the end-result, even though claims to this end are made.

Defining the field of inquiry: explicating the logic and embedded assumptions

Here I explicate the formulation of the research problem and the fundamental question(s) asked by the two theorists, i.e., what is their field of inquiry, how is this defined and if there are problems with defining the field thus. I also locate these theories within larger interests of the authors in question.

It is interesting that both Boas and Levy-Bruhl start their inquiries with the knowledge of the conclusion/s they expected to arrive at. This is more apparent in Levy-Bruhl's writings; he begins with the statement:

The series of social phenomena are solidary with respect to each other, and they are placed in mutual relationship. A definite type of society, with its own institutions and customs, will therefore necessarily have its own mentality. Different mentalities will correspond with different social types (Levy-Bruhl 1926, 27; Italics mine).

As far as I could establish, apart from references to the method of comparative sociology proposed by Auguste Comte, and the notion of collective representations formulated by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, Levy-Bruhl does not explain why there should be this relationship between a particular 'social type' and a specific 'mentality'.

Instead he begins his arguments in *How Natives Think* with the assumption that 'primitive mentality' differs radically from 'civilised mentality' and his task in this book and the next five books (which he wrote over a period of 28 years) seems to be to outline the exact parameters of this difference. Relying on secondary data, collected by sociologists, ethnologists, anthropologists⁸, travellers and missionaries, Levy-Bruhl attempts to 'fill' the bag of 'primitive mentality', with essential characteristics and traits. He turns to an examination of primitive culture, i.e., customs and institutions to support and illustrate his foregone conclusion.

Of course, he also briefly and in passing refers to salient aspects of 'civilised' culture and mentality but only for 'comparative' purposes (Levy-Bruhl: 1926, 29) as his method of abstracting distinctive features of 'primitive' mentality is one of *contrasting* the former with 'civilised' mentality. He states at the outset:

As far as the mentality peculiar to our society is concerned, since it is only to serve me as a state for comparison, I shall regard it as sufficiently well defined...The real object of my researches, therefore, is the study, by means of the collective representations of primitives, of the mental processes which regulate them. (Levy-Bruhl 1926:30)

Despite his loose affiliations with anthropology and its tenets, Levy-Bruhl, in keeping with the concerns of the discipline, defines his 'subject' and 'object' of study as the domain of the 'primitive'. In this instance, the culture and mentality of civilised human beings is not subjected to any scrutiny as their 'truth' and 'nature' are commonplace (ordinary, non-exotic) and not deemed to be appropriate subject for anthropological investigation.

In Boas there is more of an effort to show that he was conducting an enquiry in order to discover the 'right' scientifically-based answers to the questions he was posing. However, in this case more so than with Levy-Bruhl, one senses that Boas was merely seeking to 'prove scientifically', facts which he had already concluded. Additionally, Boas' book, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, being a collection of essays and lectures makes for difficult reading as a coherent argument. Whereas in Levy-Bruhl, the research questions are fairly clear and his *intention*, unambiguously stated, the same cannot be

said of Boas in this particular book. Boas begins his book with a chapter on 'Racial Prejudices', the opening lines of which go like this:

Proud of his wonderful achievements, civilised man looks down upon the humbler members of mankind. He has conquered the forces of nature and compelled them to serve him...The waves of the ocean carry him from land to land, and towering mountain-ranges set him no bounds. His genius has moulded inert matter into powerful machines which await a touch of his hand to serve his manifold demands. (Boas 1911: 1)

He continues:

With pity he looks down upon those members of the human race who have not succeeded in subduing nature; who labor to eke a meagre existence out of products of the wilderness; who hear with trembling the roar of the wild animals, and see the products of their toils destroyed by them; who remain restricted by ocean, river, mountains; who strive to obtain the necessities of life with the help of a few and simple instruments.(Boas 1911:1-2)

and says finally:

Such is the contrast that presents itself to the observer. What wonder if civilised man considers himself a being of higher order as compared to primitive man, if he claims that the white race represents a type higher than all the others! (Boas 1911:2)

Stylistically, it could be argued that in his approach to the particular problem (i.e., the status of civilised man vis-à-vis primitive man) Boas is being deliberately ironic and provocative. Neither can one disagree with his next statement:

Before accepting this conclusion which places the stamp of eternal inferiority upon whole races of man, we may well pause, and subject the basis of our opinions regarding the aptitude of different peoples and races to a searching analysis (Boas 1911:2).

Boas cautions his readers against naïve assumptions as to the 'superiority of the European nations and their descendents', that 'achievement depends solely, or at least primarily, upon the aptitude for achievement', and 'since the aptitude of the European is highest, his physical and mental type is also highest, and every deviation from the white type necessarily represents a characteristic feature of the lower type' (Boas 1911:3). So far there is little in what Boas has said that is objectionable. However, as the argument unfolds in this chapter (and this is true for each chapter and the arguments therein) numerous problems surface. First I outline Boas' method and then I provide an example to demonstrate the translation of the method into practice.

Method

- (a) posing a question based on a prejudicial or stereotypical view.
- (b) Subjecting it to 'searching analysis' (by recourse to historical and scientific knowledge, as the case may be)
- (c) offering evidence that in fact supports the stereotype in (a).
- (d) providing counter-evidence to the facts stated in (b) and (c).
- (e) offering a preliminary and tentative conclusion
- (f) and finally stating uncategorically, almost in the same breath, his final conclusion (which I think contradicts his earlier claims).

Example

- (a) Boas poses the question if the larger brain of Europeans implies greater mental faculty of the European races?
- (b) Extending the question, Boas reviews the 'known facts': he points to the two methods of ascertaining the size of the central nervous system, the weight of the brain and the size of the cranial capacity. He states 'There are, however sufficient data available to establish beyond a doubt the fact that the brain-weight of the whites is larger than that of most other races, particularly larger than that of the negroes. The investigations of cranial capacities are quite in accord with theses results' (1911:25).
- (c) Continuing the question posed, Boas asks 'Does the increase in the size of the brain prove an increase in faculty?' and he answers, 'This would seem highly probable, and facts maybe adduced which speak in favour of this assumption'. Boas then provides this evidence, relating to the larger brain size of man with respect to other animals, the larger brain size of eminent men and that 'the heads of the best English students are larger than those of the average class of students' (Boas 11:26).
- (d) Boas states 'The force of arguments furnished by these observations must, however, not be overestimated'. He then provides data to the effect that not all eminent men have large brains and most importantly that the brain weights of men and women are different.
- (e) He says, 'Notwithstanding these restrictions , the increase of the size of the brain in the higher animals, and the lack of development in microcephalic individuals, are fundamental facts which make it more than probable that increased size of the brain causes increased faculty, although the relation is not quite as immediate as is often assumed' (Boas 1911:26).

(f) 'The reason for a lack of close correlation between brain weight and mental faculties is not far to seek' and that it is erroneous to assume that the white man represents physically the highest type of man because anatomical and physiological considerations do not support this view.)

I have found it imperative to deconstruct Boas' argumentative style in some detail for a number of reasons. Firstly, this chapter is illustrative of Boas' method, one that he uses consistently throughout the book, whether he is talking about the relationship between the environment and physical variation, the influence of heredity on human types or the relation between race and language. Secondly, this breakdown enables me to point out the difficulty in following steps (a) to (f) in Boas' scheme. It is clear that Boas does not want to accept the point of view posed in (a), and opts for the conclusion he posits in (f). However, it is not clear to me how the steps (b) to (e) lead to an acceptance of the conclusion stated in (f). Thirdly, it has allowed me to further demonstrate that points (c) to (e) did not in fact lead to the conclusions (posited in (f)) already premised in the hidden political agenda behind his handling of (a). If anything, the method leads to the rejection of any definite conclusion regarding the relationship between the size of the brain and mental ability. More importantly it shows how Boas *does not* arrive at his neatly stated conclusions (see also page 7, both in this chapter and in the book as a whole) *through his theorising*. Boas' conclusions, as I see it, *precede* his inquiry, and I would further say that he *found* and *demonstrated* what he wanted to⁹, not what he hoped the 'searching analysis' would lead to. He appears to merely (but probably hoping for the effect of convincing his readers) to use the framework of scientific discourse to 'prove' the validity and reliability of his pre-given conclusions.

Many of the assumptions that the two authors make in their theorising are implicit in the discussions so far. I now explicate some of the salient premises that dictate the formulation of the research problem in theorising 'primitive mentality' in both the cases. The first issue I attend to is an epistemological one, relating to the assumptions made about the nature of reality (in particular the subject matter of the inquiry at hand), its methodological component being the techniques and more importantly the rationale by which such reality is deemed to be accessible.

In the context of this paper, I am led to ask what the subject matter of their investigation is and how it is defined. First of all, it is striking to me that Boas and Levy-Bruhl make thought processes the subject matter of their research. In constructing the unit of analysis as such, among others, both the theorists are forced in a sense to 'reify' this (i.e., thought processes, mental traits/characteristics, mental faculty/ability, workings of the human mind) before it can be theorised. In this process of reification they further commit the error of assuming equivalence

between the various linguistic terms employed (such as mental characteristics and mental faculty/ability, in that they have the same referents, not just within one culture but also cross-culturally), as well between their concepts (abstractions) and the social reality they are trying to make sense of. It would appear that for Boas and Levy-Bruhl, concepts are equivalent to words.

In theorising 'thought processes' (primitive or civilised), one needs to ask how these (which according to Boas and Levy-Bruhl, evoke images of 'mental activity', 'having to do with the mind', 'the psychological state', being 'abstract' and therefore by definition, not accessible empirically) are 'objectified' or made an object of their inquiry (Durkheim 1892). That is, how can they be 'grasped' so that they can be investigated 'scientifically', something that both Boas and Levy-Bruhl insist upon: a need to approach, especially 'primitive mentality', objectively and without prejudices (Boas 1938:666, 685; Levy-Bruhl 1926:17-18, 361). So how do Boas and Levy-Bruhl identify manifestations of thought processes?

In talking about mentalities, which is the subject of his inquiry, Levy-Bruhl assumes that these 'workings of the mind' can be 'objectified' in the workings of institutions and their functions within a particular society. In other words, Levy-Bruhl sees 'mental traits' (thought) 'concretised' in 'human action' (as expressed in human behaviour) and through 'language' (more importantly, in 'speech' as in what is said about a particular cultural trait in a society). Thus human behaviour and human utterances are the vehicles by which human thought is made explicit. This seems to be a thorough-going empiricist stance.

There are several assumptions being made here: there is first of all a reification of thought processes. Levy-Bruhl talks about the 'functioning of prelogical mentality', the 'mentality of primitives in relation to the languages they speak...in relation to numeration' and 'institutions in which collective representations governed by the law of participation are involved', institutions and beliefs relating to 'hunting', 'fishing', 'illness', 'death', 'birth', 'divination', and 'initiation of medicine men'. By reification of 'thought processes' and 'mind' I mean the ways in which the 'mind' and 'its workings' are accorded an empirical reality, such that it takes on the properties of an 'object' or a 'thing'. Examples of this abound in Levy-Bruhl's writings, but I quote only a few to illustrate, 'The primitive's mind *views* the matter very differently however' (Levy-Bruhl 1923:35), and 'When this happens, how is primitive mentality affected by it? It immediately recognises in such phenomena the manifestation of occult powers and it explains them, as a rule, as a presage of great misfortune' (Levy-Bruhl 1923:58). More than reification, where a concept is treated as if it is a thing, in Levy-Bruhl, the 'mind', 'mentality' and 'mental functions' are treated as if they are almost 'organic'; the mind 'sees', 'views',

'recognises', 'responds', 'explains' etc. Secondly, Levy-Bruhl clearly makes an equivalence between language and 'thought'. He states:

The essential characteristics of the mentality of a given social group should, it seems to me, be reflected to some extent in the languages its members speak. In the long run the mental habits of the group cannot fail to leave some trace upon their modes of expression....With differing types of mentality, therefore, there should be languages which differ in their construction.(Levy-Bruhl 1926:139).

Finally, Levy-Bruhl assumes an equivalence between that slice of reality being theorised (how the mind of primitive mind works and manifests itself) and its conceptualisation (as in 'pre-logical mentality'). Levy-Bruhl does not raise any queries as to the possibility that there might be a gap between the 'workings of the mind' and his abstractions of this.

Additionally in his effort to avoid biological and psychological determinism and reductionism as well as evolutionary and diffusionist explanations, Levy-Bruhl posits a relationship between particular social structures and particular mentalities. Levy-Bruhl thus accords significance to what he calls 'collective representations' (ideas, beliefs and notions common to a group of people) in influencing that group's mentality, and hence places emphasis on what he calls 'sociological' factors. He is led to conclude that since the 'collective representation' of primitive groups is 'mystical' and that of civilised groups is 'scientific', their respective mentalities are thus denoted accordingly.

The next question that is important to me is whether there is any evidence of essentialising, even if no direct definitions of concepts and categories are offered. In Levy-Bruhl this is clearly the case. Throughout the two books Levy-Bruhl states the 'fundamental' and 'essential' traits of 'primitive mentality' as well as the 'essential dissimilarities' between the two types of mentalities. The basic features of 'primitive mentality' are: it is 'mystical', 'pre-logical', indifferent to contradictions, lacks objectivity, relies on direct participation and experience of the world and employs different categories of logic. Conversely Levy-Bruhl also offers a laundry list of features peculiar to 'civilised thought': it is scientific, objective, rational and critical of the world of invisible forces, and privileges sensory perception instead.

Turning to Boas and his conceptualisation of 'primitive mentality', we note the following. To the end that Boas conceptualises 'workings of the mind', we see the same essentialising tendency, not just with the category of 'mind' but also 'language', 'culture' and 'race'. He says the 'Essential characteristic of the mental processes of man is the power of reasoning' (Boas 1911:97), '...the principal characteristics of the mind of primitive man occur among primitive tribes of all races...' (Boas 1911:124), and 'I will give another example of a form of association characteristic of primitive society' (Boas 1911:235).

It can further be demonstrated that Boas has his own 'laundry list' or 'checklist' of features peculiar to 'primitive' or 'civilised' cultures, and therefore their corresponding mentalities. Boas would in fact deny subscribing to this 'unscientific' position, given the lack of evidence or proof for this. However, a close reading confirms that he does provide a checklist of elements that constitute 'primitive mentality'; It is characterised as such: an 'inhibition of impulses, power of attention and power of original thought' (Boas 1911:105), the inability to overcome 'emotional resistance', a tendency towards 'conservatism', 'lack of logical connection in its conclusions' and 'lack of control of will'. Of course Boas would take issue with such a reading, stating that this is not his *conceptualization* of the mind of primitive man or its functioning. Rather, he might continue, these are stereotypes that serve as mere starting points for him, and ones that he 'demolishes' in the face of available 'scientific' evidence. I might agree with Boas if I heard or read only his articulated and explicit reasoning but when I examine the *reasoning and procedure* by which he arrives (or does not arrive at these neatly-formulated conclusions) I am less inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt.

In Boas one also finds the tendency towards the reification of 'mental functions' and 'mentality'. Here more so than in Levy-Bruhl, one notes a trend towards treating the 'mind' in organic terms. Boas is concerned with articulating the relation between the 'structural' components of an organism and its 'function'. In so doing he treats the mind as having an organic reality, equating it with the 'structural' components of an organism and its 'function'. In so doing he treats the mind as having an organic reality, equating it with the 'structure of the brain' and assumes this to function in a specific way. He says:

Differences of structure must be accompanied by differences of function, physical as well as psychological, and as we found clear evidence of difference in structure between the races, so we must anticipate that differences in mental characteristics will be found. Thus, a smaller size or lesser number of nervous elements would probably entail loss of mental energy, and paucity of connections in the central nervous system would produce sluggishness of the mind (Boas 1911:115).

Earlier in the book he has stated the same idea in a different way:

what is true of the physical traits is obviously no less true of the mental traits, but it is difficult to express mental characteristics in numerical terms of variability.

as might be expected, if we consider mental condition as dependent upon bodily form, the great variability, even in the most uniform group, of the structure of the body, particularly of the brain, makes it very plausible that very large differences in individual disposition may be expected (ibid:91).

It seems ironic to me that although Boas explicitly disavows biological determinism (as illustrated in his explicit rejection of the influence of heredity in determining culture, language and mental ability, in favour of environmental factors), the quotations just noted locate him within biological reductionist frameworks as well as within positivist circles. Finally, in talking about how changes in the body form are effected by new surroundings, Boas has this to say about the mind:

From these facts we must conclude that the fundamental traits of the mind, which are closely correlated with the physical condition of the body, and whose development continues over many years after physical growth has ceased, are the more subject to far-reaching changes (Boas 1911:65).

I argue that in conceptualising thought processes, both Boas and Levy-Bruhl assume a difference in the way that workings of the 'primitive mind' and the 'civilised mind' manifest themselves, as well as a difference between 'civilised' and 'primitive' peoples (although this difference is expressed dissimilarly by the two). For example, Levy-Bruhl quite clearly classifies human beings into two groups: the 'civilised', by which he unambiguously means members of the 'European'/'white'/'Western nations' etc. and the 'primitive', by which he refers to the rest of the world i.e., 'non-Western' groups, including in the latter tribal communities in Africa, the Americas and Asia as well as nations in these regions. For Levy-Bruhl 'races' appear to have no separate conceptual existence. Boas on the other hand, consciously constructs the categories of the 'primitive' and 'civilised' irrespective of 'racial groups'. He says:

According to the meaning of the terms 'civilised' and 'primitive', it is perfectly conceivable that there may be civilised groups belonging to different races (like the Chinese and the Europeans), and civilised as well as primitive groups, both belonging to the same race (like the Yukaghir of Siberia and the Chinese, or like the group of educated negroes in the United States and the primitive tribes of the coasts of Africa). (Boas 1911:31)

So for Boas, apart from the dimension of racial classification, there is also the axis of social designation of individuals, and 'primitive' and 'civilised' man may be found on both these axes. But Boas, as usual in this book slips into other meanings of these terms, as we see:

We will first direct our attention to the differences between civilised man and primitive man, both being members of the same race. *For the white race this difference can no longer be observed, because there are no primitive white men in the strict sense of the term. Nevertheless we may discover certain analogues* (ibid:39; Italics mine).

Numerous such instances can be identified in this text. Significantly such 'slippage' carries methodological implications that I will shortly address.

Returning to the assumption of differences between these two categories of humans (their cultures and their mental functions), both authors further premise their arguments on the belief that 'civilised' man behaves in specific ways, without subjecting this proposition to any investigation- conceptual or empirical. Levy-Bruhl states this quite categorically. Boas often skirts the issue but as often is trapped in his own argument, as in:

Although we ourselves have hardly any definite taboos, to an outsider our failure to use certain animals for food might easily appear from this point of view (Boas 1911:215).

In our modern society the consideration of cosmic phenomena is constantly associated with the effort to give adequate explanation for them, based on the principal of causality (ibid:230).

The peculiarity of association is also another expression of the conservatism of primitive culture and the changeability of many features of our civilisation. We tried to show that the resistance to change is largely due to emotional sources, and that in primitive culture is the prevailing type: hence the resistance against the new. *In our society, on the other hand, many actions are performed merely as means to a rational end* (ibid:240; italics mine).

In civilisation there is a constant readiness to modify those activities that have no emotional value (ibid:240).

The question of methodological orientation is particularly problematic in Boas and Levy-Bruhl given the comparative method used by both theorists. By this I mean not just the source of their data and the kind of data used as support for their theorising, but also the philosophical and intellectual traditions from which such categories as 'mystical', 'logical', 'scientific', 'causality', 'natural phenomena', 'civilisation', 'intelligence', 'mind-body dualism', and 'rationality' etc. are drawn and their meaning/s taken-for-granted. These notions are obviously taken from the intellectual traditions generated within the framework of 'Western' theorising. Thus to use these categories and their content freely and unproblematically, (as both these author do), to articulate the contrast between 'primitive' and 'civilised' ways of thinking and furthermore in accounting for the differences between them, is an issue that must be attended to. It is imperative to point out that both Levy-Bruhl and Boas use these categories drawn from a particular cultural tradition, assuming translatability across cultures, and do not address or even acknowledge that their methodology might be limited, in the process.

Furthermore in Levy-Bruhl much of the data is in the form of linguistic evidence. Bearing in mind Bloch's (1991:189) argument that much of the knowledge that anthropologists are interested in exists in the form of 'non-linguistic' form in the heads of informants, raises

methodological and interpretative problems in Levy-Bruhl's work. Boas' reliance, on the other hand, upon 'scientific' facts (by which is meant in this book anyway, statistical and other quantitative data), methods and techniques to solve the problem of constructing conceptual tools in anthropology is even more disturbing. Boas' assertion that the political problems relating to the relations between the races should be 'solved on the basis of scientific knowledge, not according to emotional clamour' (Boas 1911:252) is particularly problematic. His heart was probably in the right place in this plea but his apparent trust in the power of 'science' (in its rigorous techniques, its value-freedom and its accuracy) to solve these problems reflects his positivist stance.

Making an assessment of these two styles of theorising

The specific conceptualizations of 'mental characteristics' of 'primitive' and 'civilised' groups by Boas and Levy-Bruhl have provided a body of data for assessing their respective theoretical strengths and weaknesses. In a sense my discussion of Boas' and Levy-Bruhl's theories so far already carries an implicit critique. However in this section I attend to two other issues: one, I articulate and itemise my specific assessment of the theorising in the named works of Levy-Bruhl and Boas and two, I address the broader question of how theories and theorists are evaluated in the social sciences.

Locating both theorists and theories historically and within relevant academic and intellectual traditions is an important step in any evaluation of theories. By this I am not suggesting that either theorists or their theorising is *necessarily bound* temporally or by the intellectual climate in which they are located. However I would argue that historical contextualisation is an important starting point in assessment of theories.

Having embedded Boas and Levy-Bruhl in this way, I am not interested in evaluating the substantive content of Boas' and Levy-Bruhl's theories of 'primitive mentality'. Here I do not ask who was 'right' and who was 'wrong' about the way that the human mind 'works'. The kind of issues raised in this paper go against pursuing this line of questioning. I am even doubtful of the anthropological validity of phrasing the problem in these terms, using such categories as 'primitive' or 'civilised' or indeed if this is a legitimate research question to pose. Furthermore, because I am not concerned with whether 'primitive thought is really like or unlike that of civilised groups', in evaluating these theorists I am attentive to the method of theorising, not the content. As such I agree here with Evans-Pritchard (1981:122) when he says that 'a scholar should be criticised for what he has said and not what he is supposed to have said'. This comment

is made by Evans-Pritchard in relation to Levy-Bruhl, but in my view it applies as well to Boas and indeed to evaluation of most theories. As such my evaluative comments on the works of these two theorists are contained *within* the frameworks of their own argument. I do not critique their works vis-à-vis *other* interpretations of 'primitive mentality', although a great deal has been written on the subject both during, and since the early 20th century.

It is of greater importance to identify *how* Boas and Levy-Bruhl *theorise* and *conceptualise* their particular substantive concerns. What I am interested in, are the ways in which Boas and Levy-Bruhl make sense of the material before them and if I find their methods of doing this convincing or not. In other words, my assessment focuses on gauging coherence of their theories; the difficulty lies in deciding the basis upon which to do this. I suggest that responses to these questions can help in this regard:

1. What are the premises upon which conceptualisations are built?
2. Do the conclusions follow from the stated premises?
3. Is it possible to identify clearly the methodological and epistemological position taken by the theorists?
4. Is it possible to pin down the assumptions made or does the ground seem to shift constantly? and how problematic is the latter?
5. What is the strength and consistency of the conceptualisation offered? Can one identify any contradictions between the stated/articulated conclusions and the subtext in the narrative (concept in use versus concept in thesis)? and how does one get to the subtext which is often difficult to 'prove', can be sensed only if one reads between the lines and by paying attention to the ways in which language is used?
6. Does the author answer or address the questions that are claimed to have been answered? What, if any, is the political agenda? and does this interfere with the theorising?

One could derive generic principles on the basis of these questions, and use them in the reading of any social science text for conceptual coherence. Bearing in mind this list, my reading of Boas and Levy-Bruhl produced several 'difficulties'. With Levy-Bruhl I found it somewhat easier to handle the material. In his writings I found it unproblematic to identify both his assumptions and the starting point of his enquiry. Consequently, his theorising is at least 'internally coherent' although most of the time I did not agree with his premises and therefore his conclusions. Levy-Bruhl's method and style (in being *explicit* about his position) in his writings, ironically make him more vulnerable to criticisms. Evans-Pritchard has suggested that by

'prelogical' mentality Levy-Bruhl means 'little more than unscientific or uncritical, that primitive man is rational but unscientific or uncritical' (Evans-Pritchard: 1981, 123). Although I agree with Evans-Pritchard's conclusion as stated, what seems more significant to me is that in Levy-Bruhl's formulation of 'pre-logical' mentality, he attests to the possibility of a logic based on principles other than that of Aristotelian logic (believed to be dominant in 'Western' thinking) and does not necessarily accord ontological primacy to the latter. More importantly, one can certainly question his premises (there is tremendous scope for this) and also his conclusions, but there is a certain 'logic' in this theorising and his method of conceptualising 'primitive mentality'. Furthermore, there appears to be no hidden agenda (political or otherwise) in Levy-Bruhl's writings and so I was not confronted with the same problems as when reading Boas' *The Mind of Primitive Man*.

In Boas, in my view, his political agenda constantly interferes with his theorising. As I mentioned earlier, Boas' larger concern in this book is to establish that there is no correlation between race and culture and specifically to make a 'scientific statement' on the relationship between the 'negroes' and 'whites' in the United States. In so doing, Boas does talk about 'primitive' mentality and culture etc but his subsequent theorising vis-a-vis the relations between 'race' and 'culture', as expressed in this book, appear to me 'incoherent' and 'inconsistent'. There were several levels at which the book could be read: the explicit message of the book is commendable (i.e. to facilitate better understanding among members of different races), but a subtextual reading leads to rather different conclusions. Often I found Boas assisting me in the latter, through his writing, his occasional 'slip of the pen' and often via his glaring contradictory statements.

One of my major problems with Boas is that I find his explicitly stated conclusions and statements at odds with his theorising as contained in his 'narratives'. If one reads the summary of his book and those of each of the chapters, there are problems but his theorising does not appear to be confused or weak. However reading the actual details and the substance of these chapters, where Boas shows how he arrives at his conclusion, raises many problems from the point of view of conceptual cohesion and consistency. Let me furnish some examples:

I think these considerations illustrate that the differences between civilised man and primitive man are in many cases more apparent than real (page 114).

Almost in the same breath, he says:

This does not mean that no differences can be found, only that the method of investigation must be different. It does not seem probable that the minds of races which show variations in their anatomical structure should act in exactly the same manner (page 114 – 115).

And later in the same chapter, he states:

Our brief considerations of some of the mental activities of man in civilised and in primitive society has led us to the conclusion that these functions of the human mind are common to the whole of humanity (page 122).

The contradictions and ambiguities inherent in these three statements are hard to miss. Many other examples of this nature exist throughout the book. As such insofar as Boas' theorising is reflected in this book, I find this method at best 'ambiguous' and at worst 'sloppy'.

There was the added difficulty of deciphering the various meanings Boas posits to particular terms and categories. I have already pointed to the ways in which he defines 'primitive' and 'civilised' man *across racial groups*, but at times slips into using these terms to refer simply to members of the 'negro' and 'white' races respectively. A further problem in Boas' book relates to the assumptions that he makes and trying to 'pin them down'. Very often, these are not clearly articulated or consistently adhered to. In relation to gauging what the premises are and if the conclusions follow from these, I find this next to impossible with Boas. Granted that in many theories the underlying assumptions are not explicitly stated, but remain implicit, with Boas the assumptions seem to 'shift' ground consistently, hence my difficulty in assessing the coherence of his theorising.

Concluding remarks

Finally I would ask if the theory and the conceptualisations on which the former are based further our knowledge about the field of inquiry that has been outlined and help us to better make sense of social reality. This relates back to the issue of production of knowledge referred to earlier: where did the formulation of these theories take Boas and Levy-Bruhl in their own works and where did it take anthropology and what is the value of this for anthropologists today?

In terms of the debates to which Levy-Bruhl and Boas contributed (i.e., the nature of 'primitive mentality' vis-à-vis 'civilised mentality' and the relationship between them), more than a century after these authors were writing, the matter has been far from settled. Levy-Bruhl's contribution to the theory of 'primitive mentality' were contained in his first two books, although towards the end of his career, he retracted his position somewhat, especially in light of new fieldwork data. However, Levy-Bruhl, both at the time of his writing and today, has not been well-received by anthropologists, with some exceptions. Part of this is due to the fact of his being a philosopher, logician and an 'armchair scholar'; a status that was not held in high esteem by the empirically-minded anthropologists of the time. His writings were seen as mere philosophical

speculations and he was often perceived as being 'ethnocentric', and finally his questioning of the idea of the 'psychic and physical unity of mankind' prevalent at the time, did not make him popular. In addition his reinterpretations (sometimes contrary to mainstream opinion) of the works of such 'anthropological giants' as Edward Tylor, James Frazer in Britain and Franz Boas in the United States did not help him either.

Interestingly Levy-Bruhl himself seems to have changed his mind somewhat about his earlier theorising and writes:

let us expressly rectify what I believed correct in 1910: there is not a primitive mentality distinguishable from the other by two characteristics which are peculiar to it (mystical and prelogical). There is a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among 'primitive peoples' than in our societies, but is present in every human mind. (Levy-Bruhl 1949)

In doing this, Levy-Bruhl rethinks his conceptualisation of 'primitive mentality' and makes some room for individual variation and moves the emphasis away from collective modes of thought. Interestingly, Levy-Bruhl's attempts at reconceptualising his own work have seldom been pointed out by critics, except to say that 'he was wrong and he admitted this was so'.

This is particularly ironic since the idea of 'cognitive relativity' that was anticipated by Levy-Bruhl, did later become current and respectable in the form of 'cognitive anthropology' and 'symbolic anthropology'. In fact it could be argued that the inspiration for the schools of the 'new ethnography', 'ethnoscience' and 'folk ethnography' (which became popular in the 1960s and reached a peak in the 1970s), with their emphasis on 'folk/native/indigenous classifications' and the significance of the 'emic' versus the 'etic' view, can be traced to Levy-Bruhl's early writings. It appears then that it is not entirely the content/substance of a theory that determines its acceptance or rejection, as anthropological knowledge by one's peers; rather it is a question of who is generating this knowledge via theorising, when and where. This is certainly exemplified in Levy-Bruhl's case, and not very different from the contemporary situation in anthropology. Furthermore, ideas and theories have cyclical life spans; ideas come into vogue and disappear, only to reappear later, perhaps in a modified form, but they never really disappear forever.

On the other hand Boas has an undisputed place in the annals of American anthropology. Boas' contribution to the establishment of American anthropology as a discipline, its professionalisation, his commitment to training a generation of anthropologists and raising anthropology to the status of respectability in American academia cannot be ignored or easily glossed over. Furthermore, his involvement in practical issues pertaining to the incidence of racism and other discriminatory practices in the United States is clear. Boas' social and political liberalism and his commitment to the cause of the downtrodden and the exploited are also

documented. However as a theorist (at least in the *The Mind of Primitive Man*) Boas' contribution cannot be described in the same laudatory terms. The reasons for this have already been discussed earlier. It remains to be said that despite this conceptual confusion in Boas, he is remembered, and his position unchallenged as the 'founding father' of American anthropology.

My own evaluation of Boas and Levy-Bruhl, as well as by other critics, has raised in my mind the following question: What makes an anthropologist, or from what qualities does an anthropologist obtain a reputation? Is it on the basis of one's ethnographic contribution, teaching, administrative and bureaucratic competence, or one's theorising, or a combination of all of these? More crucially, what space does theoretical rigour occupy in this equation? In my assessment of Levy-Bruhl and Boas, I have found the former to be more rigorous and sophisticated in his theorising, yet remains a relative unknown amongst anthropologists today. I found Boas' theorising to be weak and often internally incoherent, yet Boas is recognized as a founding father of the discipline and considered one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century. Lesser (1981:2) has this to say about Boas:

In the course of his career, Boas fostered the development of American anthropology as an academic discipline and as a profession. Establishing systematic graduate training, he produced two generations of anthropologists, and his students went on to build departments at other major institutions.

He continues:

A relentless critic of the incautious theorising of his day, Boas established new canons of empirical research, emphasizing the importance of field investigation...Through his work on a wide range of problems, and though his institutional achievements, Boas redefined the scope and methods of American anthropology.

It is impossible to argue against Boas' contributions to the discipline of anthropology as stated by Lesser in the first quotation. However as far as Boas' powers of theorising are concerned, in my reading of his *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), I would take issue with Lesser's second statement.

With this comparative discussion of Boas and Levy-Bruhl, I have presented a case for greater attention to methodological rigour in concept-formation as an additional criteria for assessing producers of anthropological works. Then perhaps, Levy-Bruhl who is critiqued largely for his substantive position vis-à-vis the nature of human thought- on ethnographic grounds- may be assessed more positively given the methodological sophistication of his writings. At the same time, it may be possible to be critical of Boas, who no doubt will be rightly remembered as a

distinguished anthropologist who made significant contributions to the discipline, but at least in the named text, does not show himself to be the most rigorous of methodologists.

End Notes

¹ This is a revised and updated version of a paper I wrote in the fall of 1991 as a first year student, for a graduate seminar entitled 'Concepts and categories in the social sciences', run by Assoc.Prof. Michel Rolph-Trouillot, at the Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University.

² I make a distinction between 'method' and 'methodology'. The former refers to specific data collection and analysis techniques, whereas the latter carries the logic of how one arrives at the particular technical and procedural choices. Discussions of methodological issues are often glossed over in most ethnographic accounts, the emphasis being on data collection and fieldwork procedures instead.

³ In this context the commentaries by Evans-Pritchard (1934, 1981), Needham (1972), Tambiah (1991) and Horton (1973) are significant. Also see Littleton (1985) for a thorough documentation of responses by anthropologists and other social scientists to Levy-Bruhl's ideas.

⁴ See for example Littleton (1985) who argues that Levy-Bruhl's ideas have contributed directly to the development of symbolic anthropology, cognitive anthropology and structural anthropology.

⁵ Interestingly, Levy-Bruhl himself towards the end of his life recanted the ideas he had so forcefully articulated in his first two books. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

⁶ Following Weitz's (1977,16) reasoning, Boas does not ask the question: what is the nature of x (primitive mentality)? but rather: what does x do? (What is the role of primitive mentality?). Thus Boas appears to "define" "mental functions" in order to conceptualise the relationship between race and culture.

⁷ In the introduction to *How Natives Think* (1926), Levy-Bruhl expresses his dissatisfaction with the current and available explanations (especially from the group of English anthropologists) of the relation between "savage" and "civilised" mentality (p. 17). Levy-Bruhl takes issue with the animistic theories proposed by Sir James Frazer and Sir Edward Tylor in accounting for the differences between "savage" and "civilised" mentalities (pp. 20-27). Levy-Bruhl was further suggesting in his earlier writings that the preconceptions that underlie the former interpretations of primitive thought must be discarded. Most importantly he seemed to be saying that primitives are not "engaged in a fumbling, infantile use of our own canons of our own logic" (Horton 1983, 251).

⁸ Interestingly Levy-Bruhl utilises data collected by Frazer, Tylor and Boas to prove his case but he of course interprets their data quite differently.

⁹ This relates to Boas' hidden agenda, which he articulates right at the end of the book in a paper entitled, "Race problems in the United States".

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