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Margaret Mead: Public Anthropologist

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## feature

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### Margaret Mead

Public Anthropologist

*Nancy Lutkehaus*

**M**argaret Mead was the best-known anthropologist in 20th century America. The American Museum of Natural History even includes her as one of its treasures, the only person in a list that includes fossilized dinosaur eggs, meteorites, and rare uncut emeralds! Mead was born in 1901, at the beginning of what Henry Luce later described as “the American century.” It was also the century in which the science of anthropology came to maturity.

By the 1960s, Mead’s name as well as her image—that of a short (she was only 5' 2"), stocky, grey-haired woman often dressed in a flowing cape, wearing sensible low-heeled shoes, and carrying a forked walking stick—had become recognizable to a large portion of the American public through her many appearances on television talk shows and her monthly column in *Redbook* magazine. By the time of her death in 1978 Mead had become a public intellectual and an iconic figure who represented a range of different ideas, values, and beliefs to a broad spectrum of the American public—critics and supporters alike. For many she also came to symbolize the disci-

pline of anthropology, and she was the only anthropologist some had ever heard of.

Why now does Mead, whose name has become increasingly unfamiliar to younger generations of American college students, remain significant, perhaps even more so, to the field of anthropology today?

I have recently completed a book about Margaret Mead that describes why she became famous and what her celebrity says about the role of anthropology in 20th century American society. I embarked on this project in part because I had worked for Mead at the American Museum of Natural History while I was an undergraduate anthropology major at Barnard College. I was impressed by the broad range of social issues and contemporary problems to which Mead applied her anthropological expertise.

A closer look at Margaret Mead’s career reveals that she has many lessons to teach us about the continued relevance of anthropology and, just as importantly, how to communicate anthropological findings to a broader public. Although in the popular

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mind Mead is often associated with her work in Samoa and studies of so-called “primitive societies,” Mead was an early pioneer of what many of us like to call “public anthropology”: an anthropology engaged in studying local concerns and in helping to solve the problems of people living in the contemporary world. For Mead, anthropology was never a discipline limited to the study of formerly “primitive” non-Western people. As she was fond of saying, “Everything is anthropology!”

Mead’s skill as a writer helped to propel her into the limelight as one of the 20th century’s leading public intellectuals. She first attracted popular attention with her classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Because she wrote in engaging and non-jargon-laden prose, her work was able to attract nonspecialist readers. Her anthropological insights presented new perspectives on issues that many readers during the Roaring Twenties cared passionately about, such as American adolescents and sexuality. “This Week: Sex in the South Seas,” ran the headline for the *Nation’s* review of *Coming of Age in Samoa*. According to her reviewers, Mead found that the premarital sexual permissiveness that she had observed among adolescents in Samoa was responsible for the lack of adolescent stress in Samoan society. The implication was that similar relaxed attitudes toward adolescent sexuality should be adopted here (although Mead herself never stated this explicitly!). As a result of the popular success of her book, Mead began to be regarded as an expert on adolescent development and human sexuality.

It was her talent as both a writer and a public speaker that elevated her status from merely that of a proficient anthropologist to that of media pundit. Mead’s ability to give her readers and audiences a new understanding of themselves, their children, and their culture was an important aspect of her popular success. Her succinctness, a good sense of humor, and accessibility of language and ideas are key elements in communicating the relevance of anthropological insights to a wider public.

Mead established her reputation as an anthropologist on the basis of her fieldwork among various tribal groups and small-scale societies in Samoa, New Guinea, and Bali. However, it was her research, writing, and speaking about American society, as well as what we might today acknowledge as a prescient interest in globalization, that set Mead apart from her contemporaries and earned her popular renown.

During World War II, she published her first book about American culture, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America*. Written as part of the war effort to encourage American support for the war, Mead sought to identify the characteristics of Americans that would be most useful in fighting against fascism and in leading the world after the war had ended. In part because of her new expertise on American culture, the U.S. government sent Mead to Britain as a spokesperson who could interpret American culture, and, in particular, dating behavior, to the British, who were inundated with American troops stationed throughout their country.

After the war, Mead returned to Manus Island in New Guinea to examine the impact of the war on the islanders. Their lives had been upturned by the arrival of huge numbers of American soldiers in the Admiralty Islands during the war. In *New Lives for Old* and in her television documentary, "Margaret Mead's New Guinea Journal," the stories she told suggested that the postwar world was one of greater interconnection between remote cultures such as the Manus and the United States, that change was inevitable, and that both societies had things to learn from one another.

Many Americans, especially women, became familiar with Mead through her monthly column in *Redbook* magazine, which she wrote during the 1960s and 1970s. One column that created a stir was entitled "Marriage in Two Steps—A Proposal" (July 1966). Mead proposed that two types of marriage should be available to Americans. One, which she called "Individual Marriage," would be a licensed union in which a man and a woman were committed to each other as individuals for as long as they wished to remain together, but not as future parents. In contrast, the second type of marriage, "Parental Marriage," would be explicitly directed toward the creation of a family. The individual marriage, Mead thought, would give young couples the opportunity to get to know one another intimately with more sense of commitment and caring than a brief love affair, while the Parental Marriage would have at its core economic concerns as well as the establishment of a social network of people invested

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in the lives of the couple's children. In many respects, today's acceptance of people "living together" for years before they marry or separate resembles Mead's concept of an Individual Marriage. This article, and others like it, expressed Mead's ongoing interest in experimenting with new forms of traditional institutions, adapting them to the realities of a changing society.

Few people are aware that Mead was also interested in very pragmatic problems such as housing, urban development, race, water and air pollution, or nuclear breeder reactors, or of her work with educators, architects, urban planners, and environmental scientists. Her approach to practical problems changed over the latter part of her career in a way that we can now recognize as prescient. In the 1950s, she optimistically promoted the introduction of culturally appropriate forms of technological change, but twenty-five years later—having seen the disastrous results of programs such as the Green Revolution in Asia—she had changed her mind. In her 1975 photo essay, *World Enough*, done in collaboration with the photographer Ken Heyman, Mead argued that postwar technological progress had not



(Courtesy of the Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History)

solved the problems of the poor and underdeveloped nations. We need, she argued, to “rethink” the future, and to rely less on technological fixes and more on behavioral change, such as our conserving of natural resources. Mead’s message, largely unheeded except by fledgling environmentalists, came decades before Al Gore published *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Mead thus became a celebrity as a result of her skill at translating anthropological insights garnered from non-Western societies into meaningful and accessible critiques of American society, and because she was committed to using anthropological methods to study her own culture. Not only were her insights relevant and engaging, she had at her disposal a proliferation of new mass media with which to communicate them. Her wit, humor, and self-assurance were particularly well suited to radio and television. These all combined to afford her a

unique opportunity to have her voice heard as a public intellectual.

Over time anthropology has evolved in ways that Mead would appreciate. Indeed, many of the current developments of a public anthropology are actually practices that Mead either initiated or paved the way for through her own projects and her broad conception of what anthropology could do. One reason to look anew at Margaret Mead is that her career as an anthropologist pre-saged the trajectory that anthropology has taken around the turn of the millennium.

That trajectory includes developments such as medical anthropology, the ethnographic study of the practice of medicine, and anthropological work in the fields of mental health and health care delivery. It also includes what is now known as media and visual anthropology, inspired by Mead’s use of movies and photographs as a source of valuable data about cultures. She was among the first anthropologists to point out that the processes of media production were culturally determined and demanded anthropological study.

Mead was one of a group of anthropologists who transformed their wartime experiences in Washington, D.C., into the postwar subdiscipline of applied anthropology, the application of anthropology to practical problems of development and culture change. Her study of nutrition during World War II initiated the anthropological study of food and nutrition in the United States. Mead’s work inspired various approaches to the study of psychological anthropology and cultural psychology. Anthropologist

William Beeman has even argued that Mead's work during the 1940s on the study of culture at a distance was an intellectual and methodological precursor of today's Cultural Studies.

Mead's contributions to the anthropology of education began in 1930 with the publication of *Growing Up in New Guinea* and continued throughout her career. Her study (with Rhoda Metraux) of the image of the scientist among American high school students, and her continual attention to the impact of new technologies on different cultures presaged today's Science and Technology Studies. Although at the time many of Mead's anthropological colleagues were disdainful of her interest in applying anthropological methods to everyday problems, today Mead's forays into these areas are recognized as groundbreaking, leading to the development of the discipline's present focus on public anthropology.

What was it about Mead and the era in which she lived that allowed her, an anthropologist, to achieve the degree of national and international fame she had during and after her lifetime? And why has anthropology not produced another "Margaret Mead"? The answer lies in several quite specific attributes of Mead as an anthropologist and the ways in which these at-



Mead lived during a period when an anthropologist could be both a heroine and a celebrity.

tributes and the discipline of anthropology resonated with the period in which she lived. Perhaps most significant was the fact that she was a woman. Mead understood this herself when she said, "I make much better newspaper copy as a woman than I would as a man." She came

of age during a period of great change in the roles of women in American society. She was both instrumental in shaping some of those changes and was in turn shaped by them. Thus it was newsworthy when she transgressed various boundaries—professional, social, sexual, and gender—in what she did, what she said, and how she lived her life. Today, such moves are commonplace among women.

Mead lived during a period when an anthropologist could be both a heroine and a celebrity. The public intellectual Susan Sontag could still, in the 1960s, write about "the anthropologist as hero" without being either ironic or cynical about the anthropological endeavor. Yet it is unlikely that any anthropologist will ever achieve the same kind or degree of fame as Mead did. This is not because anthropology will never attract anyone as smart and as media-savvy as she was. It is because the moment when one anthropologist could capture the public's imagination and serve as a "representa-

tive" figure for much of American society has passed.

During the first half of the 20th century in America, there was a great intellectual and popular preoccupation with questions of race, sex, gender, culture, and civilization—questions that anthropology and anthropologists addressed either directly or indirectly in their work. In the marketplace of ideas, anthropology was a hot new commodity. Moreover, Mead became famous at a time when American intellectuals began to wrestle with the idea of culture—what exactly was culture? Did Americans have culture? What was the difference between Culture and cultures? Were some cultures superior to others? Today the ethnographic concept of culture is now widely accepted and its use ubiquitous in common parlance.

Although her name is no longer a household word or as readily recognized as when she was alive and seen frequently on television, Margaret Mead lives on in popular culture. The Internet in particular has provided her a new means of immortality. You can download your favorite Mead quotation and emblazon it on T-shirts, coffee mugs, or screen savers, and her image is used to promote everything from the legalization of marijuana to fat people's pride.

Aside from the omnipresent references to Mead as a 20th century female icon and role model for young women and girls, another frequent reference to Mead is her most famous quotation: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the



only thing that ever has." A huge number of organizations and causes, from the Cayuga Nation, a Native American group that is fighting to regain land in upstate New York, to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, use the quotation as an epigram.

The quotation does not appear in any of Mead's published work, and may have first appeared in one of her public speeches, perhaps, some say, in her speech at the Earth Day celebration in 1970. The essence of her words, however, may be found in her book, *The Wagon and the Star: A Study of American Community Initiative*; the book analyzes community projects that are very

much like the small group, community-based, local endeavors to which the quotation refers.

The quotation is emblematic of a set of ideas and values that Mead has come to represent for Americans: a pioneering “can do” spirit that helped people create the United States in the first place, and the importance of a community taking the initiative to work together toward a common goal. Mead’s words and her life’s work represent the desire for a socially engaged populist anthropology and a strategy for chang-

ing anthropology itself. After all, we, too, are a small group of thoughtful committed citizens.

**Nancy Lutkehaus** is professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Southern California. Her book, *Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon* (2008) is published by Princeton University Press. Her most recent research includes working with community-based organizations in Kenya that care for orphaned children.