

A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought [Abstract]

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This article identifies a seminal instance of Indigenous influence on Western thought. It does so by revealing a form of idea power exercised by Indigenous Americans: the power to transmit messages through the medium of people who came to meet and learn from them. In 1894, the Kwakwaka'wakw people of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, invited the anthropologist Franz Boas to take part in their system of Indigenous governance, the potlatch. At a series of dances and feasts, Kwakwaka'wakw leaders performed the notion of transformation, offering a dynamic vision of humanity as a single, varied, and constantly changing global community. Guided by an Indigenous intellectual, George Hunt, the Kwakwaka'wakw civilized Boas into a new way of seeing. They turned him from a static concept of culture, focused on the differences between groups of people, toward a dynamic concept of culture, focused on the universality of global experience—an experience of diversity. To identify such episodes of Indigenous influence, scholars must open a new archive—the vast corpus of Indigenous thought and action compiled by anthropologists—and begin writing a truly global history of ideas.

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