Margaret Mead: The original social justice warrior who smashed stereotypes

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“A 24-year-old flapper ventures alone to live amongst savages in the South Pacific,” the tabloids trumpeted.

It was 1925 when anthropologist Margaret Mead left Columbia University in New York to study the culture of the people of Samoa. The stereotypes used by the press were typical of the time. It was commonplace to refer to non-Westerners as “savages”, to label modern young women like Mead as “flappers” and to insinuate that they were silly flibbertigibbets rather than serious scientists.

Mead was a living refutation of these cultural attitudes. By the end of her career, stereotyping based on gender, race or sexuality was no longer acceptable. Mead’s life and work catalysed the feminist revolution, busted the myth that biology was destiny and helped fan the fire of the civil rights movement in the US. She was, in the best sense of the term, a social justice warrior.

Her passion for cultural tolerance and mutual respect are as relevant today as they ever were. In the modern world, where “social justice warrior” has become an insult and empty slogans like “feminism is cancer” pass for political commentary, Mead’s insight into the way other cultures relate to our own can still teach us powerful lessons. And it all began with that trip to Samoa.

Just out of graduate school, Mead travelled to the Pacific to find out about the experience of adolescence in a far-flung culture. She wanted to know if it was a period of sexual angst and intergenerational conflict, as it was at home. The fruits of her research would become the first-ever anthropological bestseller, Coming of Age in Samoa, in which Mead titillated prudish readers with the news that women on the remote island “enjoy as many years of casual love-making as possible”. Adolescence there was remarkably free of turmoil. Rape was unknown, she reported. The 1928 book is often credited with helping to spark the sexual revolution.

Mead also drew lessons for her fellow Americans. She argued that Western culture was increasingly alienated from the human experience. Americans of her time were a people “denied all first-hand knowledge of birth and love and death, harried by a society which will not let adolescents grow up at their own pace, imprisoned in the small, fragile, nuclear family from which there is no escape and in which there is little security”.

Mead’s Edenic picture of Samoan life would later be mocked as the “wind-rustling-in-the-palmtrees” school of anthropology by one irate academic. New Zealand ethnographer Derek Freeman, who did fieldwork in Samoa in the 1960s, claimed that the young anthropologist had been duped by her research subjects.
Freeman’s critique of Mead has itself been discredited. Nevertheless *Coming of Age in Samoa* remains controversial 90 years after it was published. In 2014, the US conservative organisation Intercollegiate Review called it the “worst book of the 20th century”.

Mead would probably be amused. Bold and assertive, she relished a fight. In an age when women were supposed to find their true selves through motherhood, Mead proved that a woman could make it in the notorious boys’ club of academic anthropology.

But she had bigger fish to fry. Her writings were a brazen challenge to America’s conservative social values. Bisexual herself and already on to her second (of three) husbands, Mead wrote about a Samoa in which homosexuality was casually accepted. She would later describe a tribe in New Guinea where women were politically dominant, and another where men and women took equal roles in child-rearing.

She came to conclude that gender differences were a product not of biology but of *culture*. “Personality differences between the sexes are cultural creations to which each generation, male and female, is trained to conform,” she wrote in 1935, in her usual forthright style. It is a view that science is *finding ever-more evidence to support*. Laurel Kendall at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where Mead worked for most of her professional life, puts it more succinctly: “After Mead, the word ‘woman’ could never be put in a fixed box again.”

Mead also tackled race and concluded that, too, was a cultural construct. In 1970, she and black social critic James Baldwin held a 7.5 hour public discussion on the topic, published as *A Rap on Race* in 1971. “Mead was a bit of an idealist,” says Kendall, “who thought if only people would set their minds to it, we will fix this thing.” Baldwin appreciated Mead’s spirit, Kendall says, but thought she was hopelessly naive about the issues around race in the US.

Naive or not, Mead’s work had a profound impact. “Her readership was not the people in the seminar room,” says Kendall. She wrote in glossy magazines and appeared regularly on late-night television. She had little patience with scholarly obscurity and was convinced that anthropology – which she defined as the study of what it means to be human – had a duty to foster cross-cultural understanding. With her trademark flowing cape and forked walking stick, she struck many as a prophetic figure. As a result, her ideas reached millions of ordinary folk whose concerns were far from those of academia.

She walked the walk as well as talking the talk. Mead’s daughter Mary Catherine Bateson, born in 1939, says her mother applied what she learned in the Pacific to her own childhood. “I was the first natural-childbirth baby without the use of pain medications, and the first breastfed baby, that [20th-century child-rearing guru] Benjamin Spock ever saw.” Taking inspiration from the extended family households that prevailed in the Pacific, Mead enlisted several of Bateson’s aunts to share the tasks of mothering. “My mother deeply believed that just because we have atom bombs and computers, that doesn’t mean we do everything better than everyone else,” says Bateson.

It was Mead’s expertise in “everyone else” that led the US government to hire her during the second world war to study the national temperament of America’s allies and enemies in order to
anticipate their actions. It was the heyday of applied anthropology, when it was thought that conflicts could be avoided if we made the effort to know other peoples better.

Laura Nader, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, believes that an activist anthropologist like Mead couldn’t thrive today. She quotes anthropologist Sherwood Washburn as saying, “When the country moves to the right, anthropology gets kicked out the door.”

What would Mead think of the alt-right in the US and nationalist movements in Europe seeking to roll back the ideals of cultural pluralism that she spent her life championing? Would she feel discouraged by our own cultural zeitgeist?

Perhaps, but the anthropologist who watched the Pacific move from the Stone Age to the space age in a matter of decades knew better than anyone how quickly cultures can change. And Mead, who died in 1978 aged 76, was an optimist at heart. “We are continually faced with great opportunities,” she wrote, “which are brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems.”