

## MASA BULLETIN

**HAIRY LEGS AND GOVERNMENT TASK-FORCES: A NOTE ON AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF DIVERSE MATERIAL:** The purely scholarly importance of communication between people of different specialties is obvious. It is surprising, however, how often practical applications lurk just around the corner. I spent the summer of 1965 as a Fulbright Lecturer in Costa Rica. During a question and answer period in my American history class the discussion turned to the American Indian. Steeped as they are in American cinema and television, Costa Ricans are understandably curious about the subject. I fielded their questions as best I could from what I had just learned about our Indian population in the course of editing this series of papers, and had occasion to remark that although of course many acculturated Indians or people with only a little Indian blood living in the general culture know very little about their Indian heritage, they are usually quite proud of their ancestry, and perfectly willing to bring it to your attention. In point of fact, although I had had no idea of the size of our part-Indian population, I had been aware since my high school days that there were a lot of part-Indian people around; several schoolmates had told me with some pride that they were part Indian. While working on the present collection, I had confirmed their ubiquity by asking my own students at the University of Kansas how many knew that they carried some Indian blood. Four in a class of 41, two in a class of 12 and one in a class of nine said that they did. None looked in any way to me to be "Indian"; all were quite happy to be so identified. The Costa Ricans, however, shook their heads in disbelief. Although Costa Rica has relatively little racial trouble, Indian blood is thought of as something to be hidden. Indians, a Costa Rican will tell you, have no body hair. So well-groomed middle-class women in snazzy dresses and high heels, elaborately coiffured and elegantly mascara-ed, show hairy legs under their tinted stockings, hirsute evidence that they bear no Indian blood. To my students, what I said (I finally convinced them) was obviously deeply shocking. For they knew all about American attitudes towards Negroes, and the fact that there is a country in the world in which Indian blood is something to be proud of forced a rethinking of all basic assumptions about class, race and democracy. Latin American students, even the good ones, tend to be very know-it-all. They like to lean heavily on easy generalizations and to refer anything you say to their own set of opinionated ideas. I date a more pragmatic approach on their part toward history in general to that discussion of the Indian.

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More important applications are easy enough to conceive. One of our contributors points out the fact that our experience with our own tribal peoples should be richly instructive as we learn to deal with the problems of tribal people in the emerging nations. All well and good; he is undoubtedly right. But our experience with Indians will do our diplomats and foreign aid personnel no good at all if they are unaware of it. We have as yet no systematic means of getting people in diverse specialties into contact with one another, even when we are faced with a problem as large as national diplomatic policy. How, after all, is a diplomat to know that an anthropologist who does not even specialize in tribes in the area in which the diplomat is working may have something very useful to say to him? And the anthropologist, like any academic, thinks in academic terms: he wants to communicate with his colleagues in a paper delivered at a convention or an essay in a scholarly journal. He would, of course, be happy to contribute what he knows if asked; indeed, he would probably be deeply flattered to do so. But the chances of his volunteering information are slight, and his chances of being asked, sligher.

The problem of getting what we should from what we know has arisen in the past in our national experience. I suppose the most notorious example of a failure of communications is in nineteenth century land policy. Congress, with access to the sound findings of a series of distinguished projects of exploration and analysis, behaved throughout the century as though it knew nothing of the character of the land it was parcelling out.

In encouraging contrast is the story of the mustering of scientific talent immediately before and during the Second World War. A group of distinguished scientists from diverse fields went to President Roosevelt to explain to him that science and technology could, in all probability, spell the difference between victory and defeat in the war which they felt was coming. His favorable response made possible the creation of a federal agency to keep the right people in touch with one another and to provide focus for research of all sorts which could have military significance. The accomplishments of this directed effort are famous and impressive: the production and application of penicillin and blood plasma, the impressively rapid improvement in radar (in close cooperation with Great Britain), the development of the atomic bomb and the perfection of the proximity fuse are but a few. (James Phinney Baxter's Scientists Against Time [Boston, 1947] is a good account of its operation.)

So far as I know, no one has ever considered any comparable mustering of diverse talent for political or diplomatic ends. Perhaps such an organization would be too cumbersome to operate effectively, for after all, since its aim would be to bring into focus the knowledge and hypotheses of very different and often apparently unrelated areas, it would be exceedingly

difficult to tell from which source a useful idea might appear. Why, for example, should anyone think to tap the experience of an anthropologist who specializes in American Indians when the problem at hand is an aid problem, let us say, in an African nation? The government can and does often call in teams of specialists to give it advice on specific problems; my guess is that it would at present be impractical to try to design machinery to make available the contributions of people from diverse areas. Which means that in practical terms responsibility for transmitting such information lies on the shoulders of our growing group of interdisciplinarians, people who as a professional commitment keep in close touch with a number of disciplines. It is one of the functions of the present Journal, and this issue in particular, to serve as a medium through which such contact can be established and maintained.

But although everyone agrees that such contact is desirable, the various disciplines are damnably self-perpetuating and insular. The interdisciplinarian who is making a living as a sociologist too often tends to measure himself only against other sociologists. He even has an in-group language designed, originally, for rapid and almost "coded" communication, but which in fact serves to keep outsiders away. So too with other specialties and other specialists. Within American Studies itself, there has of late been a response to this tendency. The administrators in some American Studies programs at American schools now want to de-emphasize the "interdisciplinary" aspect of their programs and to insist on American Studies as a discipline in its own right. Of course it is, and can hold its own against other and more traditionally established disciplines, but if it too insulates itself it is liable to become entirely a "secondary" field, not in sufficiently close touch with the good new work in the various disciplines. And the American Studies specialist will then be, as he sometimes is already, a pretty dilute product: a second-rate anthropologist, a history buff and an amateur literary historian. Live contact with current research seems to be essential. It is in no sense antithetical to an equally genuine commitment to work which transcends the boundaries between the disciplines. But the quality of work which thus cuts across boundaries depends largely upon the availability of reliable generalizations from the various specialties.

Then, too, there is the problem of doing something about what one has seen. The present collection of essays once again offers a quick illustration. Sometimes the conclusions of scholars working in one area would be immediately useful to people in others if the good people in others only knew about them. I do not think that we have many readers who are now actively engaged in the administration of secondary education. In their paper, the Waxes arrive at their conclusions about high school drop-outs through work with an Indian community high school. But as they point out, "The practices and policies of most high schools attended by underprivileged urban children are proving more like those [of the Oglala Community

High School] than they are unlike." The Waxses' conclusions are, so far as I know, new; they are certainly also bright, stimulating, suggestive. Will they ever get into the hands, let us say, of school administrators in New York or Chicago? Will the War on Poverty people in Washington be influenced by them? They will only if some of the twelve hundred or so readers of the present collection do the job of putting them where they can do some good. Thus another one of the purposes of the present collection is to provide information, observations and recommendations which will be of use not merely to people working directly with the complex problems faced by the American Indian community, but to others, in fields as diverse as diplomacy and education as well.

-- SGL

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