



## Melting Pots, Vanishing Americans, and Other Myths\*

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THE AUTHOR WELCOMES this opportunity to contribute to this issue on new concepts and trends in library service to the disadvantaged. It is assuredly a sign of growth and development for a profession, as with an individual, when such self-conscious efforts are made to reexamine practices and priorities in the face of one's objectives and accomplishments. As we focus on the disadvantaged, or more appropriately on the disestablished or disenfranchised, librarians, anthropologists, social workers, doctors, lawyers, government officials, and many more are all caught short. To quote from the preface of *The People vs. the System; A Dialogue in Urban Conflict*, "We of the establishment—meaning all of us who are part of the system and hence feel that we have or can get what we want—assumed that it was beloved as the source of security and well-being by all the right-minded. We did not understand—and they were too insecure to tell us—that . . . we who had gold to give were doling out silver."<sup>1</sup>

It is no longer true, of course, that library users, consumers, our informants, or tribes are reticent to tell us what they want or what they think about what we are doing. The varied styles of feedback and protest are all too clear. In such times of great ferment and reexamination, we should ask what we know about ourselves and how we use what we know to advance both knowledge and human well-being. While librarians individually may be found in public or school or medical libraries, research institutes, suburban branches, mobile units, etc., the librarian's

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mission and mandate provide a thread of unity that connects them all. Anthropologists, too, are found in many diverse specialities and settings throughout the world. Some years ago, Kenneth Boulding, perplexed with this great array of anthropological interests, doodled a limerick that could apply equally well to librarians. It goes like this:

The whole vast perspective of man  
Is what anthropologists [read "librarians"] scan.  
So the net that they take  
Is as big as the lake;  
Let the fish get away if they can.<sup>2</sup>

I do not want to belabor the commonalities between librarians and anthropologists. However, I would like to say something about how our knowledge gets advanced in understanding social and cultural groups in American society and to describe a new anthropological approach that has come to be known as "action anthropology." As the reader will see, this approach combines in a novel way the two interests that both anthropology and librarianship have always professed: learning and helping. As these notions are developed, I want to reveal something of the findings of action anthropology, not only as they touch upon some of the more distinctive cultural populations in our country, but also as they tell us something of ourselves. For in the process of learning about our fellowmen, anthropologists have learned a great deal about themselves as scientists, as citizens, and as Americans. And finally, I will get to implications: what are some of the lessons we have learned about diverse groups, how we come to understand them, and what is implied for professionals and practitioners who attempt to be of service.

It may come as a rude shock to many librarians that knowledge in the social sciences does not grow by adding books to the shelves—as if they were bricks being put on a growing edifice of knowledge. Unlike the physical and biological sciences, the social sciences have few breakthroughs, few critical experiments. Rather, this knowledge has been advanced in great measure by questioning some of the earlier assumptions that were laid down by our predecessors in the study of man. It advances by studying notions we thought were so—that turned out to be "just so."

To illustrate this, it was commonly assumed, until recent years, that immigrant groups coming to America would eventually assimilate, that they would disappear into some mainstream of American culture. America was regarded as the melting pot; here diverse groups from all over the world, selected on a quota system, were to give up their "for-

eign ways" and merge into some great togetherness. This was assumed by politicians, educators, and social workers, as well as by social scientists. Our diverse ethnic groups were encouraged to get on with the business of disappearing—it was termed assimilation and Americanization. Of course, they were allowed the occasional opportunities to dress up in their exotic costumes and to serve some quaint dishes, but these were viewed as symbols or survivals of an otherwise obliterated past. Even the most "objective" students of society assumed this was the path. It was assumed that one, or two, or possibly three, generations would result in the disappearance of minority ethnic groups on the American scene. The great anthropologist, Alfred L. Kroeber, whose texts in anthropology were more widely used than any others, confessed that he found community studies in America equally monotonous and depressing. Each study appeared to him to repeat the principle that "when a bulldozer meets the soil that nature has been depositing for ages, the bulldozer always and promptly wins."<sup>3</sup>

This view is no longer accepted by most social scientists in America.<sup>4</sup> It is even more soundly rejected by the great number and variety of American ethnic groups, who view this theory as Mark Twain did his obituary—slightly exaggerated! As the eminent Harvard historian, Oscar Handlin has indicated, the so-called melting pot has not prevented American nationalities from "cultivating their own gardens." Values, language, family and kinship patterns, neighborhood and group identities, styles of life, and distinctive personalities persist. Often the first generation born of immigrant parents, in an effort to "make it" in America, and under pressures from the not-so-silent majority, seemingly turned in full flight from the heritage, traditions, and associations of their parents. Yet, many of these identities reemerged later in life or in the next generation. Nor was this reemergence based on any nonsensical notion of racial unconscious. It was simply a matter of selecting or adhering by choice to values and ways of life that were cherished.

As Handlin has stated, "In a free society such as the United States, the groups which devoted themselves to nongovernmental functions tended to follow an ethnic pattern. Men with common antecedents and ideas were usually disposed to join together to further their religious, charitable, and social interests through churches and a multitude of other organizations; and through such activities many individuals became conscious of the fact that, while they were all Americans, some were also Swedes or Jews or Dutch or Quakers."<sup>5</sup>

While immigrant ethnic groups have not melted into a common pot,

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this by no means suggests that their cultures, their commonly shared ways of life, do not change. One of the critical findings in anthropology is that cultures have a tendency to persist longer than most of us can possibly imagine.<sup>6</sup> At the same time—and this may sound like a paradox—they can change radically and quickly before our very eyes. The author spent several years, for example, with a tribe of Buddhist pastoral nomadic Mongols who came to the United States as displaced persons from Russia. These were the Kalmuks, described by Thomas DeQuincey in the classic *Revolt of the Tartars*<sup>7</sup> as descendants of the tribes of Genghis Khan.

The Kalmuks had been a pastoral nomadic people for as long as anyone could remember. Even as they lived in the Don River area of the European portion of Russia, reorganized into the Kalmuk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, they clung to their traditions, including their customary economic pursuits. As they were about to come to the United States in 1952 under the Displaced Persons Act, everyone seemed to agree—including the Kalmuks themselves—that their best bet for economic survival and resettlement in America would be as herdsmen and ranchers in Arizona and New Mexico. This was the preference and the prediction. It was congenial with the traditional pursuits of the Kalmuks. It was also what the Kalmuks said they wanted to do when they came to America. As a result, elaborate resettlement opportunities were made in the Southwest by members of the Brethren Service Commission working closely with Church World Service.

So what happened? Within six months after arriving in America, the 100 who had been resettled in homes and jobs in New Mexico all returned to the urban areas of the East—to Philadelphia and New Jersey.<sup>8</sup> How could they seemingly abandon so quickly a way of life that had been set down for them for so long? It appeared that in coming to America, for the first time in their history, they were presented with a wider array of resettlement possibilities than they had ever known. Moreover, they interpreted New Mexico and Arizona, where they were first resettled, as the Siberia of America. This was America's wasteland, they said. This was where the atom bomb was tested.

They were fearful that they had been sent West so that they might disappear as a people, to follow what they had mistakenly thought had been the "final solution" of the American Indian. Within a year of their arrival in America, the entire group of 600 was living almost entirely in Philadelphia and in New Jersey. Here they were purchasing the many-roomed row houses that were available, discovering the convenience of

a credit economy, adding pizza and chopped liver and hoagies to their menu, and being employed in a great variety of small industries. While they had abandoned their traditional economic and nomadic pursuits, they retained their great interest in being identifiable as a people, even as a nation. They worked diligently to set up their Buddhist temples and their mutual aid societies. They organized to preserve their language (Ural Altaic), to record their music, to transcribe in written form oral history, legends, and folklore.

The Kalmuks were keenly aware that, with the exception of a few specialized scholars at local universities, Americans had never heard of them. Accordingly, they made a desperate effort to recreate their cultural and community identity. They could not see themselves surviving as a people if they faced cultural extinction. They even established a Committee for the Promotion of Kalmuk Culture so that interested but uninformed Americans might know who they were.

As stated earlier, one way in which knowledge gets advanced about diverse groups in American life is by questioning and testing earlier assumptions. The theory of the American melting pot is tested and yields. The Kalmuks have not been bulldozed into the American landscape, and the author doubts that they ever will be. Some individuals have chosen to strike out on their own, maintaining little or no contact with other Kalmuks. But the choice is, and should be, theirs. And our theories should be held most tentatively—to be abandoned or revised when confronted by empirical evidence.

Another process by which we advance our knowledge about peoples of America and peoples of the world is by taking new approaches in anthropological field work and by refining research methods. Here the author would like to say a word about "action anthropology." The social scientist, following the traditions of science as laid down by the granddaddy of all sciences, the physical sciences, at one time attempted to make clear and sharp distinctions between facts and values, between what is and what ought, between when he was acting as a scientist and when he was acting as a citizen. Science was involved in gathering facts for the solution of scientific problems. Citizens, administrators, and philosophers were involved in laying out the lines of policy for the solution of practical problems.

This present generation of anthropologists—or at least some of us—became impatient with this model. We were not convinced that this dichotomy helped to advance knowledge on many fronts. Moreover, we were concerned about how our findings were used, if they were used at

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all. How could anthropologists conduct research with the living peoples and cultures of the world and not find themselves helping to resolve some of the many pressing practical problems that emerged? Most of the peoples that we studied were being uprooted, displaced, conquered, exploited, or subjugated in one way or another. This does not suggest that there was always an imperialist aggressor on the scene. Often cultural and community erosion was subtle, as most of the peoples we studied were encysted within larger, powerful, and alien nations or colonies.

Some anthropologists were impatient with a model of science and of scholarship that guided our activities to conduct systematic research resulting in many fine publications (but more often files and files of field notes) that were unfortunately read by very few. Perhaps knowledge on some fronts was being advanced, but not the general condition of man. To use an overworked commonplace, these anthropologists wanted the discipline to be "relevant" and their lives and work to make a difference. What was needed was a little less theory and a little more application. These anthropologists wanted to make sense about some things going on now—rather than in what anthropology regards as the "ethnographic present," prior to contact and contamination by Western culture.

Fortunately, a more appropriate anthropology was developing, and one new approach was articulated by Sol Tax at the University of Chicago over eighteen years ago.<sup>9</sup> He proposed that anthropologists could concurrently pursue both the goal of science, which was to advance knowledge, and the goal of administration and practice, which was to aid human welfare. These could be coordinated pursuits, with neither one taking the back seat. Learning could be hyphenated with helping. The scientist and the citizen could, in fact, be one. The anthropologist could engage in community and institutional problem-solving and do so as an anthropologist-citizen.

But action anthropology developed also through a reappraisal of the traditional model of applied science, of applied anthropology. Following the traditional model, science was to discover the principles that were then to be applied to particular cases. This was the mechanism for the utilization of scientific knowledge. Every field of science had its applied dimensions: biology and physiology had medicine; mechanics and the physical sciences had engineering; and research psychology had clinical psychology, psychiatry, and much of education. But it also became perfectly clear that in most of the applications to man, in the

human fields, there was more we needed to know than we had to apply. At the same time, we often did not know how to apply what we already knew.

The methods of action anthropology were to be clinical rather than experimental or predictive. Ends and means were not to be distinguished, but rather developed together in an ongoing process. The anthropologist was to remain in continual involvement with a population or community. In so doing, he did not see himself applying knowledge or scientific principles toward the solution of the community's problems. He was to "interact with," rather than "act on," the community concerned. He rejected the social technician image of manipulating subjects according to some experimental design or blueprint. Concern was more with discovering, developing, and clarifying goals and values. This method involved trial and error correction which requires the open, candid expression among equals, occurring in a climate of trust, not threat or coercion. The anthropologist was to reject any position of power where he could impose his views, by orders or edicts, upon others. The community was to be free to accept or reject, to offer or create, the alternatives or resolutions or compromises that emerged from the process.

Through several projects conducted under the direction of Sol Tax and some of his students and associates working with American Indians, it became perfectly clear that the vanishing American simply was not vanishing. Moreover, the numbers of American Indians were increasing, and these were Indians with tribal identities, who cherished their heritage, who were on census rolls and living in Indian settlements, and who were not about to disappear. This applied as well to the increased number of American Indians moving into urban areas. They were not disappearing. They maintained their ties with their tribes and sought association with other Indians, usually in special centers they established in the urban areas. And this was during the past twenty years following all the efforts of annihilation, isolation, reservation, termination, relocation, and Americanization.

Through years of field work activity in this new approach in anthropology by one of its pioneers, Robert Rietz, anthropologists learned that given the alternatives of sinking or swimming, the American Indian had chosen to float.<sup>10</sup> One of the critical findings of this early program of action anthropology with American Indians in North Dakota, Iowa, and Maine was the simple rediscovery of a people's right of self-determination. Why should a tribe or ethnic group have to accept a

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prediction made by scientists or others regarding its future? Moreover, it was highly presumptuous for any of us to make such threatening and devastating prophecies about the fate of a people—usually followed by policies or programs designed to carry them out. The issues of assimilation or non-assimilation, of disappearance or survival, of wanting to swim in the mainstream or float in some side eddy was not a decision for any non-Indian to make.

Yet we were all clearly caught up in some model that was mostly beyond our awareness.<sup>11</sup> Some unseen syndicate seemed to have us in its grip. This model placed immigrant ethnic groups, American Indians, inner-city blacks, and even our own youth somewhere along the lower slopes of a mountain or pyramid of progress which they have been expected to climb. Reflecting an ancient model based partially on the early Christian teachings of the “fall from grace,” this held sway in our own moral and cultural life and was quite congenial with an institutional model of authority drawn on the pattern of a pyramid. While this provided an efficient means for coordinating a host of activities in our society (i.e., where one reports to a boss who in turn reports to his boss who reports to a board of directors), it was inappropriate for this model to be applied to other realms of relationships and judgments. It is inappropriate for those of us who have made it, or who knowingly or unknowingly identify with the model, to stand at the top (or to think they stand at the top) and to classify the rest of humanity somewhere along the lower slopes.

This moral pyramid of progress implies that various groups should divest themselves of those values and characteristics which simply do not fit in—characteristics which are not like “ours.” With the black community there were some special barriers that made it even more difficult to ascend to the Olympian heights. Through misuse and misinterpretation of intelligence tests, blacks were regarded as inferior—a finding that has been totally discredited. And if they were not able to make it, this supposed genetic handicap would be one myth wheeled into place. Or if they were not to be regarded as culturally different or distinct, as were the immigrants, or culturally backward or uncivilized, as the American Indians, the blacks were to be regarded as culturally deprived. This was tantamount to suggesting that their life and experience was so meager, so thin, that it was almost completely empty and devoid of any viable and meaningful pattern. This provided, according to Murray and Rosalie Wax, justification to do just about anything in the name of cultural enrichment.<sup>12</sup>

We have been hearing much about racism and institutional racism these days. But what this author has been describing can be more deeply ingrained, more widespread than racism. Racism is based on ignorance and stupidity, and on the unquestioned acceptance by whites of things as they are. But the subtle and not-so-subtle pressures that have been described and which tend to squeeze our diverse populations into very narrow pathways, into many dead ends, are more insidious than racism. This is so partly because the process is not so detectable, and partly because it is conducted under the most reputable, professional auspices.

When the brilliant sociologist Erving Goffman describes the entering ceremonies of the total institution, where patient or recruit or novice or prisoner is stripped of property, privacy and personal sense of identity—in what he calls the “mortification process”—he may be characterizing a process more general in our society.<sup>13</sup> Some have termed a similar process, a “degradation ceremony.” This may not be confined solely to total institutions such as hospitals, prisons, or convents. Indians, immigrants, blacks, youth, and others are usually viewed as grossly deficient, even as “non-persons.” Often our very systems of labeling and categorizing people serve as self-fulfilling prophecies to keep them in their places or to keep them from changing. Some have become critical of the labeling process in psychiatry where patients are given impossible diagnoses which provide little hope for recovery.<sup>14</sup> Often by such procedures, these labels can serve to take the practicing professional off the hook. How can he be expected to do anything with such an impossible case? In the larger picture, while we expect people to make the climb up the slope, we find many more reasons for their failure—or for our inability to be of assistance.

Let us amplify on some of the lessons we have learned that may have implications for action. First of all, America’s reputation as the great melting pot or bulldozer has been greatly exaggerated. In the national struggle for identity as an emerging culture made up of many strands, there may have been a need for strongly asserting an apparent unity and minimizing, even obliterating, the differences. Exaggerated assertions as to our unity, our similarities, have born but a weak sense of conformity and ignored the true strength of our diversity. The limitations of this strong-arm style are reflected most painfully by many of our own rejecting and defiant youth. For our theories and practices have too often neglected the will or aspirations of the people—what it is they want to do and to become.

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These two critical findings—that people with diverse traditions do not disappear and that their choice and aspiration represents significant rights—must be reflected in our theories and methods in social science, as well as in our agency programs, policies and practices. A great deal of ferment that we see about us, that has reached librarians, represents various attempts to correct these overlooked notions that underlie shortsighted practice.<sup>15</sup> If one would look today at the developing field of American Indian affairs, he will find efforts designed to redress this balance. In the summary report prepared by Robert Havighurst, the director of the National Study of American Indian Education, this goal is clearly stated:

It is generally agreed that Indian people should have increasing influence and responsibility for their education. President Nixon, in his July, 1970 message on Indian Affairs proposed that Indians be encouraged to set up their own school boards and take over control of their education. . . . Assuming greater control over their educational systems means more power to make decisions in the local Indian community, and also more Indians active in the administrative and the teaching staff of the schools attended by Indian children and youth.<sup>16</sup>

This emerging pattern of participation and involvement on the part of diverse groups in regard to their schools, their colleges, their institutions, their communities, and their government, can be seen across the face of our country today. Even such institutions as veteran administration hospitals are questioning whether the service already provided to patients and clients within their settings cannot be improved by instituting "ombudsman programs" that provide outside advocates to unravel the consequences of a depersonalized bureaucracy.<sup>17</sup>

Even from the author's rather remote position vis-à-vis libraries, he can detect similar movements in the librarian's own field. There was considerable ferment at the special meetings in April 1970, in Chicago, during National Library Week. The representative from Bedford-Stuyvesant spoke convincingly of breaking down the established posture of much library practice. He felt that library programs should be tied to multi-purpose community organizations that include guidance to unwed mothers and addicts, programs on behalf of consumer education, tutoring programs in the community, etc. The representative from Philadelphia applauded the efforts of libraries to move in the direction of social service, for in so doing they would raise and improve the level of all humanity.

At those library meetings in Chicago, there was a spirit among some

librarians of holding on to tried and tested traditions in the onslaught of many pressures to change. The stance librarians take in regard to others should certainly apply toward themselves. For librarians, too, are a special population, albeit a professional community, that must continually combine tradition with new experience. This author recalls the special plea on behalf of the book in the face of all the new technology, television, filmstrips, and other audiovisual devices. Someone said that the book is still the greatest teaching machine ever invented. It is light, easily transported, and offers far less possibility of centralized control.

There is nothing inevitable about the disappearance of "the book." But we cannot sit passively and inertly in a changing universe. For some of us, action anthropology has bridged the gap between earlier notions that separated the man of science from the man of action. An "action librarian" exists, i.e., a professional librarian who places more than usual emphasis on the concern for how his information-reference-resources and facilities are utilized—how his very skills are put to use by the rest of us in society. The action dimension places emphasis on questioning earlier assumptions, roles and models of conduct. The action librarian participates in the formulation of policies, recommends legislation, helps to draw up appropriate budgets, and takes an aggressive and active part in his own associations. If the defense, police, and security forces of our country can make continuous and convincing pleas for what it takes to defend our country and protect our citizens, why cannot "action librarians" make a case for needs that affect our information, our literacy, our right to know and our right to read?

While there can be great anxiety and distress in this kind of ferment—for no one likes to have his feet firmly fixed in mid-air—this may be the kind of anxiety and discontent that can spawn great creative ideas, inventions and patterns of conduct. Libraries should not be viewed as inert monoliths or dinosaurs, unchanging or unresponsive. Rather they should participate rightfully in the center of our community dialogue, even as the keystone between what has gone before and what is to come.

Having opened with a quote from Kenneth Boulding, I will close with another that I think is appropriate. Boulding is concerned here with decision systems, about how things get decided in cities. But there is something more universal about it, for it speaks to all of us who are trying to get something done wherever we might be.

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The reason why cities are ugly and sad  
Is not that the people who live there are bad;  
It's that most of the people who really decide  
What goes on in the city live somewhere outside.<sup>18</sup>

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