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31

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## ***The Production of Ethnic Discourse: American and Puerto Rican Patterns***

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Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality. (Burke, 1966, p. 45)

### ***Ethnicity: Social Reality or Discourse?***

The persistence of ethnicity as a topic of discourse and other symbolic performances—food identification, fairs, special days, parades—in the United States is generally considered obvious evidence for statements to the effect that the melting pot has not worked as it was supposed to have worked. The melting pot was to erase cultural differences between immigrant groups, mold them into a new form, dissolve perceptions of differences, and make moot any talk of such differences. It is now evident that this characterization of the probable history of the United States is fundamentally inaccurate. Immigration is continuing, and pockets of altogether foreign forms are being continually replenished. Even more significant is the fact that many children and grandchildren of immigrants can talk fluently about ethnic difference and in a way that reveals that the making of distinctions between people on the basis of expected life-style differences is still for them a live experience, a constituent part of their social environment. These people can use, for purposes of identification, labels in which the “American” is qualified by an adjective referring to a foreign group—even when their ancestry is in fact extremely mixed. What has rarely been considered, however, is the possibility that, in important cases, this experience of

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ethnicity, particularly as it is mediated by the structured discourse people must use to express it, is in fact a fully "melted," *American* experience. This is the possibility which we will explore here through a comparison of various statements about a common story that reveal the presence of two ways of expressing ethnicity that can be found in the United States, one "Puerto Rican," and the other "American."

This possibility is a matter of interest both to sociologists and to educators. Both have repeatedly called for a deeper awareness and understanding of the phenomena grouped under the label "ethnicity in the United States." But the ensuing debates have often been more passionate than clarifying. In the heat of these debates, questions of value have come up with much more insistence than any others. For example, Novak wrote: "I disliked the general American desire to believe that ethnic groups do not exist, or if they do, should not" (1971, p. 63). He did not deal systematically with the interesting fact that even those who fear the persistence of ethnic identification in the United States can still talk about ethnic differences. Like many, he called for shifts in attitudes. Though not universal, a shift has occurred. Many in sociology, education, and the helping professions are now "aware." And yet it is possible to say that understanding has not progressed with awareness. Could it be that the matter is more complex, particularly if it is confirmed that, as anthropologists have been arguing since Sapir and Whorf at least, the form of knowledge as it expresses itself in discourse is more powerful than one's abstract, inner awareness?

In this paper we take the position that, to the extent that one can hear people talk about ethnicity in all parts of the United States, it is reasonable to postulate the existence of a form of discourse—discourse about life-style differences that are the product of the origin of one's direct ancestry; in short, *ethnic discourse*—that is systematically different from other possible forms that this discourse can also take. This form is a subsample, though probably politically dominant, of the forms that can be observed to occur in the United States. It can be labeled an *American* discourse in that its structure is homologous to the structure of the talk that Americans can produce on other matters (e.g., family life, religion, education). This American ethnic discourse will display the features of individualization, psychologization, the tendency to assume the need for even superficial unanimity and conformity that have widely been recognized as characteristic of the American way. The possibility that such homologies in structure would be found between content domains has most recently been stressed by Schneider (1969) and the work of one of us confirms the fruitfulness of the line of inquiry (Varenne, 1977, 1978a, b).

If indeed it can be shown that there exists in the United States an American ethnic discourse that is available to the people who live there, if indeed this discourse is so culturally shaped as to convince those who initiate it of its verisimilitude even as it prevents them from seeing the truly "others" in their own terms, and if it is prevalent and powerful enough to oblige all these others to take it seriously as they respond to it, then it will also be shown (1) to educators, that the problem created for them by the multicultural nature of United States society is far more complex than was first thought; and (2) to sociologists, that the melting pot may have worked, and may still be working, even though it has not been working quite in the expected manner. It now seems probable that ethnic identifications will survive in the United States for the foreseeable future. But these identifications will be made in *American*

terms, thus confirming the victory of American culture over the people who came to the shores of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter begins with general considerations about discourse processes. These provide the theoretical background for recasting the traditional studies on the place of ethnicity (as a cultural phenomenon) in the United States. This discussion will be followed by a presentation of a research methodology which we consider particularly well suited for the demonstration of similarities and differences in the structuring of discourse about a certain topic. We will then move to a brief summary of the salient features that differentiate American from Puerto Rican kinds of ethnic discourse. We will close this chapter with a discussion of a text that reveals a person in transition, and we will draw conclusions.

### *The Production of Culturally Specific Kinds of Discourse about Ethnicity*

As mentioned, few sociologists have taken seriously the possibility that the very presence of a discourse about something, a named group of people for example, is *not* proof enough that something is happening at any level other than the level of discourse itself.<sup>2</sup> As Glazer and Moynihan, rather typically, wrote:

We are suggesting that a new word reflects a new reality and a new usage reflects a change in that reality. The new word is "ethnicity"; and the new usage is the steady expansion of the term "ethnic group" from minority and marginal subgroups at the edges of society . . . to major elements of a society. (1975, p. 5)

With little respect for the kind of intuitions that have driven the work of many semi-otocists, linguists, and cultural anthropologists, they assume that discourse forms are transparent windows on social structures and that the further reality "behind" can be directly reached. They move on to sketch this new reality, and they suggest that it is of universal validity. They never consider that any discourse has a structure as well as a topic, and that this structure directly participates in shaping both the experience that the people have of what they are talking about and the subsequent actions that they take in terms of their understanding of this experience. As many have said within the frameworks of various disciplines and from various points of view, no discourse is, in any simple way, "about" a social experience that imposes its own structure on it. A discourse is a creative act, something that somebody shapes for a purpose and addresses to an audience. The main requirement for a successful discourse is not that it be "true" to what it is about. It is, rather, that it be *intelligible* (semiot-

<sup>1</sup>It should be evident that this chapter is not concerned with the creation or maintenance of ethnic identifications through boundary maintenance, of either the type described by Suttles (1968) or that described by Erikson (1975). If the chapter says something about this issue, it is the suggestion that, in some cases, boundary displays can be performed even in the absence of "differences" between the groups. Indeed, it is probable that certain boundary-maintaining sequences are directly produced by a cultural patterning shared by the people on both sides of the boundary.

<sup>2</sup>See Varenne (1982) for a more extended discussion of the same kind of myopia as exemplified in sociological writing about cliques in American high schools (cf. Dittmar, this volume).

ically—see Lévi-Strauss, 1962/1963) and *persuasive* (rhetorically—see Burke, 1950/1969), particularly if its goal is to lie or to mystify (something that discourse can do very practically and efficaciously—see Eco, 1976). Thus, it is important that we understand the formal conditions that make a discourse intelligible and persuasive even when, and perhaps particularly *if*, we want eventually to reach social conditions that transcend discourse apprehension. These are general principles of discourse production and analysis. They apply directly to all kinds of ethnic discourse.

A discourse about ethnicity, like any other discourse, is uttered for a practical purpose by a person who is reacting to a practical situation which is in part constituted by the previous talk of the participants in the situation. Both the discourse situation and the pursued goal establish a framework for the actor/speaker who must answer, in some ways, in the terms suggested by this framework. But, as Bourdieu has emphasized in a series of publications in which he reanalyzed Mauss's work on gift transactions (1972/1977, 1980), the framework provided by the ensemble [preceding situation/practical goal] does not mechanically determine the action of the person (cf. Stein, this volume). In any situation, all involved persons have a range of possible things that they can do and/or say (to help us keep track of this historical process, we will refer to this response to an initial situation as R1). These things are not all equivalent, and they have differential powers as acts that create new frameworks for subsequent possible responses by another actor (R2). Even a totally new response is possible, one that has never been offered before. The response (R3) to this response (R2), however, may or may not deal with the novelty as something to be taken seriously. It may not take into account the novelty and may be constructed as if the response (R2) had been stereotypical. It (R3) can also recognize the preceding response (R2) as unusual and take the form of a xenophobic statement of rejection or a restatement of education into the proper response. There are many other possibilities. Given the relative powers of interlocutors, the kind of interaction into which they must enter, and other historical factors, it is probable, as Bourdieu well saw, that a stock range of possibilities for the development of interactions in time becomes established and that this stock range can then be considered characteristic of a social group. Bourdieu labeled this stock range of responses a *habitus*. We will refer to it as a *culture* in deference to the more usual American vocabulary.

An ethnic discourse, as a discourse about the interaction one has with foreigners—real or imagined—is necessarily a quasi-universal discourse, since most human societies are in more or less constant contact with others. However, given the historical dimension of these interactions, there is no reason to expect that the practices that establish themselves around them would have many universal characteristics. We cannot even expect that the two sides in such an interaction will produce similar kinds of discourse—even though they may have “understood” each other during the actual interaction.<sup>3</sup> When each side goes back to its own people and reports on the

<sup>3</sup>The possible presence of such “understandings” in at least apparently cross-ethnic interaction has been demonstrated in the work of McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979). This important point has often been obscured in the earlier enthusiasm for explanations of differential treatment in interaction based on the idea of culturally produced misunderstandings. It remains that the presence of understandings-in-situation does not imply, *per se*, that the same coherence principles that organize this situation will be found in a homologous fashion in other situations produced by the protagonists separately.

interaction it has had with the strangers, it constructs something that is now a response to be made within the framework of a traditional sequence (“Let’s talk about them among ourselves”). In the United States, we can postulate the presence of many different kinds of discourse about ethnicity. Indeed, we can postulate that there are as many as there are cultures.

### Ways of Discovering

The theoretical framework just sketched dictated our research procedures. First, we had to ensure that informants would talk about the topic and produce a linguistic artifact, an instance of discourse, or *text*, which we could then analyze. This text had to be produced in comparable circumstances to hold elements of content as stable as possible. Second, we had to choose informants who were likely to handle the content in various ways. Finally, we had to ensure that the informants would have a rather direct experience of the topic that they were to discuss.

To fulfill the first requirement, we settled on a methodology in part inspired by Laura Bohannan’s (1968) account of her attempts to tell the story of Hamlet to the Tiv. She recounted that her audience of Tiv elders continually “corrected” her account and, in the process, transformed the story, the personae, their motivations, the dramatic progression, and the denouement so that the ensemble would correspond structurally to one of their own stories. They have used Hamlet as a pretext; a pre-text from which they could move to construct their own text according to their own rules for the construction of such texts. Although Bohannan contributed the original impulse from the outside, the resultant interaction that produced the new text was very much an insider event. Indeed, the situation in which people are obliged to confront a new event generated from outside their own environment and must reinterpret it to make it fit this environment is a common and altogether natural one.

To fulfill the second and third requirements, we decided to focus on experiences of and about a recent immigrant group, namely, people coming from Puerto Rico to New York City. We chose people who had spent at least some time in the United States. Some of them had come from Puerto Rico during their adult years, still spoke Spanish at home, and lived in the Puerto Rican neighborhoods of New York City. Others were those who had had direct experiences with Puerto Ricans through their professional activity but whose families did not come from Puerto Rico itself. Some were white or black Protestants, and others were Italian Catholics and Jews. They had all been born and raised in the United States—most of them in New York City. They were all social workers who had worked extensively with Puerto Rican clients.

Because of the added complexities of asking informants to react to a text like *Hamlet*, which is already strongly typified thematically and structurally, we decided to write a story in such a style that it would provoke our informants into ethnic talk without suggesting too strongly how this talk should be organized. The basis for the story was an actual case drawn from Ruskin’s professional experience. The case displayed events common in Puerto Rican biographies—including events that are often used to stereotype Puerto Ricans. The story was written in such a way as to offer little more than an empty set of biographical details with no judgmental or explan-

atory phrases and no grammatical connectives suggestive of logical linkages. Here are excerpts from this story:

Mrs. Dominguez, 39, came to New York from Puerto Rico at the age of 18. After a while she married. Her parents were separated. . . . She reported that the reason for the separation was that somebody in her father's family had cast a bad spell on them. Since then Mrs. Dominguez's mother has worked as a domestic. . . . Mrs. Dominguez's daughter has symptoms of selective mutism: She does not talk to her father and she does not talk in school. She does talk to her mother and to the grandmother who lives with them and shares a bed with her younger child. . . .

Mr. Dominguez does not want his mother-in-law to live with them. Mrs. Dominguez says she cannot tell her mother to leave, . . . it would be disrespectful. Mr. Dominguez works as a janitor. . . . Mrs. Dominguez would like to work but her husband does not allow her to. She does not speak English.

The story was introduced to the informants as a real case of which Ruskin knew.<sup>4</sup> They either read it themselves or it was read to them, and they reacted to it immediately after this reading. Stylistically, the story is told from the point of view of an implicit narrator who is not specifically named or otherwise identified, leaving open the possibility that Ruskin was in fact this narrator. Besides the actors presented in the story, the interview situation provided the informants with at least two more protagonists: themselves and Ruskin, who conducted all the interviews. The absence of explicit connectives in the story and the relatively artificial requirement of having to make something with so little made all the informants uncomfortable. All of them eventually constructed their task as one in which they were to supply the missing connectives and to relate patterns of behavior to various types of social and psychological causes. As ethnomethodologists might say, all informants tried to teach Ruskin how to select facts, how to write a coherent story. In the process, the "flat" text became the occasion for a "thick" attempt at presenting one's understanding of the human condition in difficult circumstances. Our own task can be understood as involving the discovery of the principles that our informants used for making stories coherent.

The analysis focused on the whole interview (including the reaction of the informants to the interviewer as an interactant in the task). The corpus was the transcription of the audio recording of the interview. The analysis consisted in a modified version of the type of structural analysis adapted by Lévi-Strauss (1964–1971) from Saussurian principles for his analysis of Amerindian myths. The process consists of an initial identification of a text's episodic and topical content, followed by an examination of the manner in which the various parts of the text are sequenced and con-

<sup>4</sup>The research procedure involved the following steps: (1) Informants from four different groups were contacted in various ways (the groups were: New York Puerto Rican clients of several counseling centers, New York Puerto Rican mental health professionals, New York Puerto Rican spiritists, and North American mental health professionals). (2) Each informant was interviewed separately by Ruskin in English or Spanish. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. The purpose of the study was explained to the informants, and a short biography was obtained from them stressing in particular their relationship to Puerto Rico (when they left the island, how often they go back, etc.) (3) The story was then either given to them for them to read or was read to them, depending on the wishes of the informants. They were then asked to tell it back to the interviewer.

textualized. The content and the organization of each text are then compared to the content and the organization of the other texts in relation to variations in the situation of production.

This is not the place to defend a method that has been abundantly criticized in recent years. We will simply emphasize two things about the approach. First, it obliges one to be fully inductive since it requires that one start with carefully contextualized and situated texts and only then proceed toward making statements about their internal ordering. Each text is then compared to other texts. It is only later, if the internal evidence warrants it, that a set of texts can be separated from the whole corpus as being structurally homologous at a particular level. Second, the approach leads one to treat structural ordering not as a psychological event but as a historically produced intercommunicational one. This has the advantage of moving us away from the kind of methodological questions that have paralyzed the earlier work on cultural specificity (whether from the point of view of culture and personality or that of value-orientation theory). In this earlier work, culture was localized within the individual and had to become a statistical norm: "what *most* people do, say, think, believe, value, etc."—whatever the verb may have been. To the extent that one conceives of a cultural structure as a structure of communication and in communication, it cannot be treated as a statistical event. A culture either is or is not present in a particular interaction. It is not present "to a degree." Most important, a culture (from our point of view) cannot be "varied." Within a large enough group made of many subgroups who rarely communicate with each other, several different cultures may be used, but each culture is a discrete event.

### *American versus Puerto Rican: The Relating of Individual to Group*

The structuring of the story and of the interview situation led the informants to spend most of their time establishing the missing connectives between the action of the people depicted in the story and their environment. All informants established such relationships both explicitly, in lexical terms, and implicitly, in their use of deictic forms. Consequently, the results of our analysis are summarized in terms of the way the informants integrated two sets of actors in their contexts. First, we examine how the informant set himself/herself in relation to the story and the interview situation. Second, we examine how the informant related the various members of the Dominguez family to each other. In addition, we talk of the informants' understanding of the relevance of the immigration experience for Puerto Ricans.

As we conducted the analysis, it soon became apparent that—as we had expected—the corpus of texts could be divided into two major groups, each of which exhibited similar discourse patterning. We labeled one pattern *Puerto Rican* and the other *American*. We did this for various reasons. One is that, while some of our Spanish-speaking informants used a pattern similar to the one used by our English-speaking ones, the contrary did not occur. Second, the pattern used by the English-speaking informants is homologous to patterns that have traditionally been associated with America in social science writing. Since all our informants were citizens of the United States, it should be clear by now that we do not equate America with

the United States: The former is a cultural-ideological structure, the latter is a geopolitical location.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Informant/Speaker in Context*

The research task was deliberately set up as an I-you situation in which researcher and informant were separated and in which the researcher asked the informant to focus on the manner in which the informant himself/herself would relate to the story. How the informants related the story is the primary datum of the study. As we mentioned, the story and interview offered various actors and locales that could be considered as pieces with which the informant could construct a social field in relation to himself. First, the informant had to place himself in relation to the interviewer. Her immediate presence (which, we assume, would preclude her being dealt with as a third person) gave the informant the option of treating her either in an inclusive or exclusive manner, as a "you" or as a "we." Being of Latin American and Jewish backgrounds, Ruskin had characteristics that could be used by most of the informants to place themselves at such a time and place either with her ("We are both Spanish-speaking foreigners in this land," or "We are both [Jewish] professionals") or not. In Puerto Rican discourse, Ruskin was included in the speaker's "we"; in American discourse, this pronoun was not used, and Ruskin was "you."

The informant also had to place himself in relation to the two places mentioned in the story, Puerto Rico and New York. He could place himself *in* or *out* either place, neither, or both. In Puerto Rican discourse, the speaker was systematically placed *in* in relation to Puerto Rico through the extensive and redundant use of first person plural forms ("nosotros puertorriqueños . . . somos"). S/He systematically was placed *out* in relation to New York. The two environments were strongly differentiated. The informants talked of two different *culturas* and of the fact that "they" did not understand "us." Each culture was an overwhelming social event from which no individual could, or should, fully escape. In American discourse the speaker was placed *out* of both environments. It is not simply that the speaker was not identified with Puerto Ricans as "we," but that he was not identified either with New York, The United States, or America. America was never "we" to the speakers. America was not talked about as a specific environment with particularistic traits. If it was mentioned—generally implicitly—it was simply as "here," a generalized, characterless space to which one may or may not adapt but from which one can be presented as being independent.

### *Contextualizing the Members of the Dominguez Family*

The members of the Dominguez family were a more complex set for the informants to organize, since there were six of them, they were of different sexes and

<sup>5</sup>In the following pages, in order to facilitate readability, we will write of *Puerto Ricans* and *Americans*. For these words one should read "those informants who use the particular pattern." We are not suggesting anything about the sociological reasons for their use of the pattern. The search for such reasons belongs to research other than ours. Nor do we imply that they have psychologically "internalized" the pattern.

ages, and they could not afford immediate feedback as to where they should be placed (in contrast to the feedback Ruskin necessarily gave). The Dominguezes were set as a context to each other in the story, and all the informants acknowledged this fact. They all agreed that, as one of them put it, "while the child is the primary patient, her functioning is related to her family difficulties." All informants also placed the Dominguezes in relation to Puerto Rico and New York. From then on things differentiated themselves.

The matter is delicate. A family, in English as in Spanish, can be approached either as a single unit or as the addition of a plurality of smaller single units. All informants talked about the family in general and about the members of the family in particular. Thus, differentiating between patterns is not as easy as in the case of the relation of speaker to culture, which could be treated as an either-or proposition, the evidence for the interpretation being the presence or absence of a type of identification. In the case of the relating of members of a family to one another, the situation is more complex and the evidence subtler. Let us look briefly at two texts about the relationship between parents and children:

Si Ud. quiere que un hijo sea bueno. Sea comprensivo con los problemas del hogar, entre los padres y los hijos. Ud. tiene que sentarse con ellos. Como yo hice con los míos. Cuando queremos hablar como padre e hijo, hablamos como padre e hijo. Cuando queremos hablar como amigos, les digo: "Sí, hoy vamos hablar como amigas y amigos." Me contestan lo malo que yo hago y yo les contesto lo malo que Uds. hacen. Y así podemos resolver nuestros problemas.<sup>6</sup>

A lot of cultural aspects in the family: the father's dominance, and certainly not allowing certain things to happen, the mother living in a very confined, isolated kind of existence, where she is dependent upon all the other family members to help her get around and to manage. Sometimes there is the wish to be something other than what you are but not enough incentive to make the change on your own for fear of whatever retaliation would come, say, from a husband like hers. I think we often see the youngsters in families like this becoming rebellious. . . . She can see she is different from other youngsters at her age. . . . you start worrying . . . how she will break away from the family.

The first statement was made by Mendez, a man strongly involved in spiritism. The second was made by Tripp, a woman social worker. Both were trying to deal with a common dilemma: the source of, consequences of, and proper reactions to tensions between parents and children. Both are focusing on the father and on something that both consider cultural: the father's objections to his wife's going out in public and to his daughter's dating. For Mendez, the solution is a matter of all the people *understanding* how a household operates and of clearly marking what is happening when. Another informant expressed the same idea when she said about the same topic that the solution to the family's problems was for everybody to get his or her traditionally appointed place "dentro de su rol, el padre como padre, la abuela

<sup>6</sup>"If you want a child to become good, be understanding with the problems at home between parents and children. As I have done with mine, when we want to talk as father and son, we talk as father and son. When we want to talk as friends, I say: 'Yes, today we will talk as friends [feminine and masculine].' They tell me the wrong things that I do and I tell them the wrong things that you do. And so we solve our problems."

como abuela y la madre como madre."<sup>7</sup> For Tripp, the Dominguezes problems have to do with dominance, dependence, and wrongly channeled rebellion. She went on, in her interview, to give examples of positive processes she had observed among her own Puerto Rican clients. She talked of wives slowly disengaging themselves from their husbands through her intervention, of children establishing their independence from their parents. Tripp did not want to make her clients understand how the well-organized family works or to help them play competently their traditionally prescribed role. She wanted to liberate the individual members, renegotiate their positioning so that the separateness of each can be preserved. Separation was not an issue for Mendez. He never even mentioned it to say that it is not an issue (just as no American ever talked about the need for each person to perform appropriately pre-defined roles<sup>8</sup>).

<sup>8</sup> These differences are expressed by variation in the choice of subtopic within the larger topic of parent-child relationships. They are expressed in the variation in the vocabulary used to refer to the event. In the case of the Puerto Rican informants, there was a constant use of a vocabulary of social and customary order. The Puerto Ricans talked of respect, *machismo*, the roles of the various members of the family, *our* way of doing things, and so on. The Americans talked of individual psychological states: dependence, dominance, rebellion, assertion, immaturity, mental illness, and well-being. Indeed, we might say that the Puerto Ricans never really talked about the individual members of the Dominguez family. Even when they started with comments about the case, it was only as a jumping board toward a statement of the well-regulated (according to Puerto Rican rules) family system. When the Americans talked about culture and the family as a system (which they did explicitly and repeatedly), it was always as an introduction to the detailed discussion of individuals. Indeed, for the Americans, "culture" has become an aspect of the personality of the client. It is something that is to be taken into account in the overall diagnosis. It is a symptom. Troubles occur when independence is subverted either through forced compliance or through an unreflective ("primitive") internalization. In such a case, the task of the therapist involves the "real-ization" of the separation, cognitively and behaviorally: the patients must realize that they are separate; they must then act out this realization. Such a realization may properly involve a return to the family fold, but on a new footing, as an independent act.<sup>9</sup>

### From Puerto Rico to New York

For all informants, the matter of immigration was of permanent importance for an understanding of the Dominguezes. Puerto Rico and New York are different social settings that put different constraints on the Dominguezes. This factor too was interpreted differently in the American and Puerto Rican patterns. In American discourse, the problem is one of psychological adaptation. It concerns the need to accept

<sup>7</sup>"In their role, the father as father, the grandmother as grandmother and the mother as mother."

<sup>8</sup>Garrison, in her study of Puerto Rican spiritists as mental health professionals (1977) reported that this is indeed the most common prescription these spiritists make in cases of family difficulties.

<sup>9</sup>The same pattern for American Jewish social work intervention was noticed in Leichter and Mitchell's (1967/1978) work on a Jewish family agency

and internalize new cultural objects which are external to oneself but which might be difficult to recognize as external given a long habituation sometimes joined with other personality flaws (e.g., immaturity or weakness). In Puerto Rican discourse, the problem is one of actualizing a pattern in a subsphere (the family in particular) when the larger social sphere is not supportive. The solution is to screen out the outside. As Mendez said: "Vivo en un circulo que [los americanos] llaman, ellos, 'los gettos,' no me molesta."<sup>10</sup> A Puerto Rican social worker quoted approvingly one of her clients who had told her: "Yo no permito que ninguno de afuera se meta con [mi familia]."<sup>11</sup> For the Puerto Rican informants, what was wrong with the Dominguezes was that they were not successful in achieving the necessary social reconstruction. It was not wrong for them to try. No amount of cultural awareness among Americans led any of them to consider such an attempt as legitimate. None of them perceived the role of the therapist as helping the family isolate itself with a Puerto Rican circle ruled by Puerto Rican customs.

### Transitions

Not all Spanish-speaking informants organized their response to the interviewer in a Puerto Rican fashion consistently. This phenomenon is well worth pursuing. The construction of a discourse, we have mentioned repeatedly, is a joint process during which both interlocutors participate in shaping the direction that will eventually be taken. It was therefore necessary for Ruskin to be relatively impassive during the interview. In many other situations found in real life, interlocutors are much more directly active in suggesting the appropriate direction that statements about the world should take. We can postulate that in general use there are two kinds of environments for ethnic discourse: one in which carriers of different cultures meet and challenge each other for the right to establish the major orientation of the discourse, and one in which carriers of the same culture reinforce each other as they talk in terms of their habitual discourse. All the informants we interviewed have probably found themselves in both kinds of situation—particularly the Puerto Rican social workers, some of whom were graduates of American schools. It is possible that had the interview been constructed differently, some informants might have been led to produce texts that would have appeared very American. Given Ruskin's impassivity, most chose to construct her as "one of us." Some, however, hesitated and produced texts in which the alternate pattern to the one that might have been expected to prevail appeared. Given the general power relationship between the societies, it is not surprising that we had cases only of Spanish-speakers using an American pattern and none of the reverse process.

Let us look briefly at the case of Mrs. Fernandez, a client. She was a student in bilingual education at City University. She was strongly aware of the substantive aspects of the Puerto Rican experience in New York. She talked about the misunderstanding of Puerto Rican culture by Americans, of respect, *machismo*, spiritism.

<sup>10</sup>"I live in a circle that [the Americans] call the ghetto, I don't mind."

<sup>11</sup>"I do not allow anyone from outside to interfere with [my family]."

From this point of view, she was very different from the English-speaking informants whose knowledge of the details of Puerto Rican life was always very limited. Fernandez knew what could be expected from such a father as Mr. Dominguez. She recognized that there is so much training of female children toward not going out in public that it is often a very difficult experience for them to do it, even when they have decided that there is nothing wrong with it, as she herself had done. She considered herself as moving out literally and symbolically, even in the face of opposition from her husband. She made her son vacuum the carpet, and she encouraged him to cry so that he would learn about his "feelings" (she used the English word in the midst of her Spanish). But what makes what she produced American in our view is not the overall balance of the traits exhibited. It is, rather, her manner of organizing her response. When discussing the story, she, too, placed most of the blame on the father. But she did not move on to statements about the appropriate roles fathers should play. She focused, rather, on his personal qualities. Perhaps because her training in psychology had been less intense and because she does not feel the professional commitment of social workers toward nonjudgmental attitudes, she used a vocabulary of moral characteristics that the social workers did not use. Mr. Dominguez, according to her, is "cold," "dry," "nonloving." Mrs. Dominguez is weak of character for accepting the orders of her husband. For Fernandez both of them are more extreme in these characteristics than Puerto Rican customs require. Let us show how she explains it:

Se encogió de hombros y dijo: "le tengo que obedecer." I can't believe it, she's been in New York y 39 años, es vieja tiene 39 años pero es una señora vieja, you know, no lo puedo creer. Estoy segura que aparenta vieja también, porque es así . . . cuando se casan ya uno deja de existir como mujer, ya no es uno de su persona, no se pertenece. . . . Ahora se pertenece al marido . . . como lo que él y si el dice esta bien, that's all . . . o aunque que "si le tengo que obedecer pero lo tengo que hacer, no lo encuentro bien," no veo nada de eso . . . porque vió a sus padres divorciados y a lo mejor piensa, "yo no quiero ser divorciada como mi mamá y sufrir lo que ella sufrió."<sup>12</sup>

The Puerto Rican rules for the husband-wife relationship are stated but are prefaced (or sometimes followed) by statements that distance her ("I can't believe it") and lead to a statement about the potential impact of the rules on an individual and the possible internal motivation of this individual for her actions.

This pattern (distancing/statement of rule about customary behavior/potential impact and motivation) repeated itself several times in the course of the interview. Depending on the topic and the moment in the interview, Fernandez emphasized certain parts of the patterns over others. At times, the statement of the rule became

<sup>12</sup>"She shrugged her shoulders and said: 'I have to obey him,' *I can't believe it, she's been in New York 39 years, she is old, she is 39 but she is an old lady, you know, I cannot believe it. I am sure she also looks old, because she is like this. . . . When they get married, one ceases to exist as a woman and one does not own oneself, does not belong to oneself. . . . now one belongs to one's husband . . . because what he is and what he says is right, that's all. . . .* [Mrs. Dominguez is saying] 'if I have to obey him because I have to do it, I do not find it right,' I don't see nothing of that, because she saw her parents divorce, and maybe she believes, 'I do not want to be divorced like my mother was, and suffer what she suffered'"

so extensive, complete, and forceful that it became all but indistinguishable from a statement about the same topic made by another Puerto Rican. This similarity was particularly strong when Fernandez talked about the treatment of aged relatives. At other times, it was her personal attempts at getting out from Puerto Rican constraints which were emphasized. But the very presence of such statements, as well as the intermittent use of stylistic constructions and vocabulary that focus the text on one person in its separateness, makes the whole interview stand out.

At least two of our informants exhibited this kind of ambivalence, where an intimate knowledge of Puerto Rican customs and an appreciation for some of them is joined to a conscious rebellion against those that apply most directly to the speaker. Whether this ambivalence can be interpreted as evidence that the boundary between Puerto Rico and America has been crossed may not be an issue that can easily be settled. One could imagine that the pressure of her interlocutors could lead a speaker like Fernandez to express herself differently with different persons depending on their own habitual way of constructing a discourse. Her wavering during the interview may have been partially the product of lapses in Ruskin's neutrality. Fernandez's most explicitly Puerto Rican statement, for example, came after Ruskin, halfway through the interview, specified that her research was concerned with misunderstandings of Puerto Rican culture. Fernandez's statements about her own rebellion came up as the conversation focused on her. But, of course, the process was reciprocal. It is probably not a matter of chance that Ruskin spent relatively more time during this interview talking to Fernandez about herself than she did with any other informant. In some ways, Fernandez must have prompted Ruskin in that direction.

### The American Ethnic Experience

As we conclude, we focus again on the question of the constitution of an *American* ethnic discourse with which we started. Our interest in the Puerto Rican pattern was essentially instrumental: it helped us see more concretely how an American pattern could arise in interaction even at times when one might expect that the perception of the other would be the strongest. The processual perspective that we have used to abstract the patterns can also help us see how this pattern can contribute to the difficulties foreigners have in the United States. Most research on cross-cultural misunderstandings have focused on settings where members of the two cultures meet. But in a complex, bureaucratic society, the real danger to the less powerful group lies in the fact that the situations that may most effect its destiny in the United States (e.g., the making of laws, the designing of a curricula and helping treatments) are situations in which the group does not participate. At such times, the members of the dominant group, politicians, educators, and mental health specialists will use a pattern that can lead them to mistake their ability to talk about cultural difference (a matter of topic) with an ability to understand a foreign pattern in its own terms (a matter of structure). It is certain, for example, that as Puerto Ricans have settled in large numbers in places like New York City, the many who have come in contact with them have gained a certain amount of topical knowledge. The American social workers we interviewed knew something about Puerto Ricans, and what they knew

was not completely false. It was always partial, often caricatural, and never adequate. But it was obviously grounded in certain interactions. The same things could be said of the Puerto Ricans' knowledge of American ways. Most social workers knew about spiritism, most Puerto Ricans mentioned the "freedom" Americans gave their children. The knowledge that certain informants had was in fact quite extensive, and a few could resist the urge to caricature. Most importantly, both Americans and Puerto Ricans were aware that the other group knew about them. They all were aware of New York City as a multiethnic society that is hostile to cultural difference. They all were aware that this hostility made life difficult for the weaker group. They all said that this was deplorable and that certain things should change so that life could become easier.

In other words, Puerto Rico and America, immigration, difficulties in adaptation, difference—all were easy topics of discourse for these people, whatever their backgrounds. As such, the ease with which they all entered into the discourse is proof of the immediate, existential relevance of ethnicity to an understanding of United States society. But it is not proof of how this experience is handled for communication. As we have shown, this experience can be handled through very different kinds of discourse that cannot be equated simply because they are built around the same topic. Indeed, the fact that some informants can talk about ethnicity and even identify with a particular group does not mean that they are not essentially "melted" Americans, even if this melting has not quite taken place according to the expectations of the original melting pot theory. Cultural structuring, precisely because it is a structuring, cannot be approached from the point of view of the content of statements and behaviors. The test of Americanness is not the presence or absence of certain topics of conversation but the presence or absence of a certain mode of organizing conversation, whatever the topic. While we cannot demonstrate in detail at this point how the American ethnic discourse sketched earlier is indeed a direct structural transformation of other talks about different topics of the American experience, we would like to conclude this paper by briefly suggesting how such a demonstration could proceed.

The central characteristic of the pattern that revealed itself in the talk of some of the social workers is that it systematically separates a single subject (whether the speaker or a third person that serves as the point of reference for a while) from an environment of external pressures (including other subjects and various types of habits, cultural and otherwise); this environment is made up of objective events in relation to which the subject orients himself in a deliberate fashion, "freely" to the extent that the external world has not been unconsciously or uncritically "internalized." Culture or ethnicity is one aspect of this environment. It is assumed that cultural patterns can be described independently and that the behavior of the subject can then be measured in relation to it. This pattern is very familiar to anybody aware of the writing about America. It is the pattern that those of us who have tackled the complex and controversial task of mapping American specificity within the context of the modern theories of culture in anthropology have identified as that used to organize many different areas of social life, be it family life (Kelly, 1979; Schneider, 1968; Varenne, 1977), religious and political life (Dumont, 1961/1970; Varenne,

1977, 1978a), or the life of the school (Varenne, 1978b, 1982; cf. Mascmann, this volume).

It is certain that we are far from the point when we have an adequate formalization both of the features of American discourse production and of the transformations in surface form that can occur under the many conditions of everyday interaction. And yet, we cannot ignore the possibility that America is indeed an overarching structure that organizes the most powerful events in the United States, be they political or educational. To ignore the possibility is to condemn oneself to blindness and a particularly insidious form of righteous false consciousness that insists on the need for certain kinds of awareness (e.g., "awareness of cultural differences") without giving itself the means of framing this awareness—on the grounds, for example, that there is no such thing as an American culture. The melting pot has worked. There is an American culture. It is necessary to learn the means of recognizing its presence, particularly in those settings where it hides itself. And then, when necessary, one must examine one's own productions so as to escape its overwhelming power.

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## Epilogue

Guilem Rodrigues da Silva  
Translated by Catharina Jonsson

### My Language

To Sten Soler

When I say earth in Portuguese  
TERRA  
this double "rr" crunches between my teeth  
like particles of earth  
FLOR  
blossoms on my lips  
Moon may be more beautiful than LUA  
but never sea more beautiful than MAR  
with endless shores  
where every sunbeam  
transforms the grains of sand to diamonds  
My language is the guarantee for my life  
is a constant reminder  
of sorrow  
of happiness  
of rage  
Here I have received the most  
I say thanks as a matter of course  
I say "How are you" and it is difficult not to mean it  
Non-alcoholic  
non-smoking  
the silence