

Symbolizing America

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Foreword by
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Foreword

American anthropologists have of late been "coming home" to study their own country's culture. Some never really left, for beginning with Franz Boas and Edgar Hewett there have always been anthropologists observing and writing about the American scene. But such activity has never been the distinguishing mark of the profession. There is no doubt that the exotic, remote, isolated, non-Western, nonurban, tribal, and preferably-though no longer really possibly-IlunpacifiedI peoples and places would provide the major symbols on an anthropological coat of arms. This orientation influences our behavior when, for example, we teach introductory courses in our discipline. The anthropology of America, the United States, usually gets only a nod, if that. As editors of the Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology, we generated seventeen titles on segments of American culture written by anthropologists in good standing who had done significant work in the United States as well as elsewhere. Most of these titles have gone out of print because not enough anthropology professors would use such material in their courses. It is clearly the case studies about exotic cultures that have been used widely enough to stay in print.

When we anthropologists do come home we find that we must make the familiar strange—a repeated theme in *Symbolizing America*. We must be "thrice-born," to use Sriniva's words (V. Turner 1978). We have our physical birth, we are born again when we do our first fieldwork in some culture other than our own, and we are thrice-born when we again face toward our culture, now seeing it as something strange. We might say that when anthropologists objectify and translate someone else's culture they must make the strange familiar, and when they study their own they must make the familiar strange (Spindler and Spindler 1982). They must exoti-

Anthropology, the science of man, is often held to be a subject that may satisfy our curiosity regarding the early history of mankind, but of no immediate bearing upon problems that confront us. This view has always seemed to me erroneous. Growing up in our own civilization we know little how we ourselves are conditioned by it, how our bodies, our language, our modes of thinking and acting are determined by limits imposed on us by our environment. Knowledge of the life processes and behavior of man under conditions of life fundamentally different from our own can help us to obtain a freer view of our own lives and of our life problems,
Boas 1940, v

Introduction

Herve Varenne

This book might have been subtitled "Cultural Constraints on Everyday Life in the United States." It is a book about how people conduct their lives in this country and in relation to its institutions. It is also a book about America-about some of the things that can happen when people who live in the United States confront what makes it a particular kind of place. To live in the United States is to participate in a unique historical process that has solidified into a set of laws, customs, habits, and rules for behavior and the interpretation of behavior-that is, into what we call a "culture," *American culture*.

This book also shows what a particular intellectual tradition can contribute to the study of survival in the United States. This tradition is the one that, for close to a century now, has insisted that to know Man, one must know human beings in their multifaceted, historical circumstances while resisting any easy move to universal and eternal "natural" verities. This tradition is closely associated with the discipline of anthropology, though it is of course much broader. Philosophers, historians, and sociologists have taken this perspective on what human beings produce. But anthropology, more than any other discipline, has been founded on the principle of the variability of human adaptations, a broad matter usually glossed by the term "culture." Anthropology, however, is not well known for what it can contribute to the understanding of modern life, and one may wonder what the anthropologists who have written for this volume can in fact say about America and the people who live there.

There has never been much anthropology of the United States. When anthropologists come back home it is often as quasi outsiders, what Freilich called "marginal natives" (1970). As such they may appear naive or superficial, particularly when their work is compared with that of the native ritual specialists. What can those who observe life tell those who live it?

Many, such as John Dewey, Josiah Royce, George Herbert Mead, or more recently David Riesman, Philip Slater, and John McDermott, or again John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a very few, have written and spoken about America as Americans trying to understand, and improve, what they are passionately involved with. What kind of educational system suits and nurtures democracy? What is the relation between Christianity and the building of community? What is the modern world doing to the rugged individualism that has made America? What are the risks of an overemphasis on satisfying individual needs? What is the "American dream"? What should America do to remain the "city upon a hill"? In their various ways and from many points of view, these prophets, like all those who speak from conviction within the dominant dialogue, directly address the American imagination with the particular efficacy that a myth well told always has for its audience. Indeed, what they do is express in words appropriate for public settings the yearning and puzzlement that most people in the United States, at one moment or another, could also express, albeit perhaps not in the same vocabulary. The work of people like Studs

Terkel should convince us again that wisdom is not dependent upon rhetorical competence.

Confronted with such competition, the anthropologist is at a disadvantage if he is expected to contribute to the same kind of conversation with the same vocabulary. In the prophetic mode, there is probably little that anthropology can contribute when it is being itself. The anthropological task presents itself as a scientific one-as descriptive and analytic. It is also a task that is oriented to the universe, to all men rather than to some of them. When the scientist prophesies-that is, when he draws implications . for our philosophical discourse from generalizations-it is because of political responsibilities that frame science but are not quite part of it. To produce the theoretical work that makes a bomb possible is a different activity from warning the polity of the dangers of building the bomb. The anthropologist, thank God, is not in a position to wreck our planet. But there still is a distinction between the prophetic and the analytic tasks that, at different times, anthropology may be called on to perform.

When all this is said, one might still wonder why anthropologists should claim the right to be heard along with the sociologists, psychologists, historians, literary critics, and the like, who have traditionally been given the task of holding up a scientific mirror to America. In fact, few anthropologists would disagree with what Boas wrote in the epigraph to this Introduction. Most refuse to be imprisoned in dark and dusty museums purveying exotica for curiosity seekers. Anthropology's destiny is to *US*, if not to the U.S.-natives and intellectuals who wish to participate in the contemporary conversations about what it means to be human. Anthropology will "help us to obtain a freer view of our own lives and our life problems." How? the skeptic may ask.

The task of the social sciences is to contribute to the general understanding of human behavior. Traditionally, anthropology has taken on the task of doing this by seeking what, to Western eyes, appears exotic, human, but somehow more different from what we take to be humanity than can be encountered among us. The value of this journey into the most Other lies in what it contributes to the broader, interdisciplinary conversations that together constitute the social sciences and, beyond them, our humanistic knowledge of ourselves. In these conversations anthropology has generally appointed itself the gadfly that challenges any statement about human nature built solely from observations of people in our societies. From Margaret Mead to Clifford Geertz, this has been a main theme of the discipline's contribution when addressing the other disciplines that also speak about humanity .

There has also always existed within anthropology a movement to take a determined look at our societies and to underscore what others would see as exotic. This movement has a long history. Americanists will accept the work of the Lynds in the late 1920s as "anthropology" (1937, 1956 [1929]). Lloyd Warner, on his return from research into the social structure of an Australian aboriginal society , conducted in the thirties and forties what remains the most massive community study of an American town ever done (1941-48). There is less work from the fifties and early sixties, but in recent years interest in an anthropology of America has blossomed, as the Spindlers' recent review demonstrates (1983).

Anthropology has always been "on the way back home," as people like to say. All the contributors to this volume, in one way or another, are coming home. Most of them have worked intensively in other cultures: Bee-man in Iran (1976, 1977, 1986), Drummond in Guyana (1977a, b, 1980), Myerhoff among the Huicholnians (1974, 1976), Singer and Moffatt in India (Singer 1980, [1972], 1984; Moffatt 1979 a, b), Greenhouse in Mexico (1979). Some have published extensively on their work in America (Drummond 1978; Greenhouse 1982; Myerhoff 1977, 1978; Singer 1977, 1984; Varenne 1977, 1978, 1982, 1983). All are keenly aware of the paramount importance of an awareness of the Other. All would insist that the journey back home cannot be completed. The movement that takes the anthropologist away is central to a useful return. While traveling, the anthropologist develops approaches to understanding the exotic qualities of the Other, approaches that are well suited for analysis of our own behavior in its exoticism.

The different, the surprising, the exotic has always been the prime candidate for what we usually call "the cultural." But anthropologists also insist that the non exotic, the unsurprising, everything that does not strike us as "different" is also a product of cultural processes. Planning a parade in Los Angeles must be understood in the same terms as a Balinese cock-fight. Both are the result of historical processes and also of a continuous human activity. Both are constructed; both are "artificial" in the classical sense. Neither is "simply" the product of natural drives that would mechanically determine behavior. The natural drives that do act upon us are little more, and little less, than the material we build our lives with. Because of this building, the end product is thus always elaborated in unexpected ways that go beyond necessity. Measuring the distance between nature and some state of culture is a task for which anthropologists have trained themselves in encounters with the Other where the artificiality of such apparently "natural" structures as those that govern male/female relationships, for example, could be more easily revealed. This training, the contributors to this book believe, is particularly useful in revealing the constructed aspects of the life people live in America. It is useful in suggesting new ways of understanding the processes through which people end up producing statements, behaviors, institutions, and life careers that will somehow look more "American" than, say, "french." In fact, it might be said that the contribution of anthropology to the social sciences has been the demonstration that human beings are indeed creative of their world, thereby strengthening the humanistic insights that the nineteenth-century mechanistic biases had threatened. What anthropologists can now offer are exemplary analyses of the conditions of this creativity.

This overview of the contribution of anthropology applies, in one way or another, to all anthropological work. What I offer here is the product of a general tradition and also an argument for the usefulness of a specific approach within this tradition. While there are many nuances of outlook among them, all those who contribute to this book start with the assumption that one can learn about human beings only in terms of their creative capacity for symbolizing. Symbolizing, as understood here, is the activity of transforming an object, an experience, a social encounter into "something else"-a word, a story, a myth. Symbolizing is an

imaginative activity. It is creative. It is also a very practical art. It is something that human beings concretely do when they are together. It is an aspect of their behavior .

Such an approach has many consequences that differentiate it from approaches, in anthropology and in other disciplines, that collapse the symbolizing capacity into personal fantasy, what people believe (which would rarely be "true" or "adequate") versus what they do (which would reveal their "actual" reality). If symbols-say, the American flag and the ritualism that surrounds it-are visible, then they have the same reality as, say, eating a hamburger. This, at least, will be assumed by the contributors to this book, whatever their own theoretical positions on a host of other problems.

One corollary of an interest in symbolizing as an act is the search for a multiplicity of symbols that respond to each other. No symbol means "by itself." Symbols are powerful only as they relate to each other. When looking at symbolizing in the United States, one cannot look at anyone setting in its separate terms. One must see, in the specific organization of any setting, echoes of other settings it must answer to. Thus families echo schools, whites echo blacks, individualism echoes egoism, and community values echo conformism. This system of echoes is what we will call "America."

Some will consider our decision to talk about America as a constraining pattern-that is, as a culture-to be the most controversial aspect of our work. Whatever happened in the 1960s, it clearly transformed the paradigms that had dominated the study of America from an assumption of holism to an assumption of more or less radical heterogeneity. Since Glazer and Moynihan (1963) at least, it has been very difficult to argue that there may be something limiting in the statement that a multiplicity of cultures are maintaining themselves in the United States. By the later seventies thoughtful observers were left trying to reconstruct a field for American Studies that would be based mainly on local analyses of regional processes (Wise 1979). In fact, this movement away from assumptions of homogeneity was a profoundly popular one, and scholars may not have done much more than express what became the common sense. "After all," people will say, "we are all different. Just look around you!"

Let me say at this point that the authors of the essays in this volume do not accept the radical implications of these developments. People who live in the United States do speak in many voices that are easily identifiable. Methodists do not speak like Catholics, males like females, second-generation Italians from New York like tenth-generation Boston Brahmins. Each voice, however, has a place in the chorus. Indeed, the signs that help identify the voice, and the system of connotations each carries, are controlled by the other voices and ultimately by the chorus itself: ethnicity, religion, and any of the other qualities in terms of which people can be distinguished in the United States, are not simply produced by internal processes. Rather, they are developed in interaction: Italian ethnicity is controlled by the political forces that have granted Columbus Day, the Mafia, pizza, and pasta to "Italians." People who have migrated from Italy do not have the power to refuse to place themselves in relation to such signs-even if they deny their relevance. All Italians are related to the Mafia because non-Italians will make it so.

As will be explained further, such an approach to America requires us to strongly differentiate people from the cultural patterns they live by. We take seriously the phrase with which I opened this Introduction: this book is about *people who live in the United States*; it is not, strictly speaking, about "Americans." We are not simply returning to the old search for statements about the American "mind" {as in American studies) or the American "character" {as in culture and personality work). "America," here, is the pattern in terms of which human beings must construct their lives when they interact in the United States. American culture is whatever one cannot escape in the United States. Some, like me, feel more strongly than others about the usefulness of searching for systematic distinguishing features of Americanness. We are convinced, however, that there is some- thing "different" about some of the things that happen in the United States, something that is so stable historically and so widespread geographically that it cannot be ignored.

The authors of the essay are a varied group. They look at different things. They emphasize different aspects of what they look at, and they do not make the same things of their observations. But they are all out to put concern with " America" back where it belongs, at the center of what anthropology is in fact all about. Another premise they all accept is that making the quotidian exotic is not easy. It is not enough to mention that Americans don't eat horsemeat and the French do. It is not enough to mention that there is something "not natural" in the crises our adolescents go through. Such observations are our problem, not our solution. Finally, it is a fundamental argument that culture is action. It is found in the practice of everyday life.

This volume is committed to an anthropology of America that emphasizes difference, constraint, and opportunities in the construction of every- day life. To emphasize this point, the book is organized into several sections framed by a series of action verbs intended to alert us to the variety of creative situations within which we act. America is told (part 1), it is crafted (part 2), it is improvised (part 3), it is resolved (part 4), it is done (part 5). Telling a story, crafting a statement, improvising a scene, resolving a dilemma doing anything are all aspects of action. The organization of the chapters as illustrating one aspect rather than another is thus somewhat arbitrary, and any of the case studies could be understood as illustrating other aspects of the acts that produced the events examined, be they advertisements, movies, ethnic parades, church minutes, dormitory parties, sexual activities, or invitations to "drop in."

Action in culture must always involve a careful replication of traditional categories, displaying dominant themes that appear uniquely powerful as they act on our imaginations and also on the imaginations of others we may wish to manipulate. Action in culture is also always improvised. We never speak our minds except in words that others have used. But we never replicate either. To make our audience pay attention to what we are saying, we must ring a change on the expectations. Any action in culture is at the time of its performance an "achievement," something actively constructed. In some ways, however, such action is also the end of a sequence-an attempt at closing an episode that may have been developing in threatening ways. Groups are not paralyzed by existential dilemmas produced by the clash of cultural prescriptions; they usually resolve them. These resolutions of course, are temporary. The statement that attempts to bring a discussion to closure is soon followed by

another statement that reframes it and keeps the group alive. There is no stopping action in culture.

Finally, action in culture is told. Nothing is more human, perhaps, than telling each other what happened yesterday, what happened in our absence, and then placing these descriptions in broader mythical, religious, or ideological frameworks. As I mentioned earlier, there are many settings in the United States where such tellings occur. The one I reflect upon in the first two chapters of the book concerns the telling of action in America that has evolved within anthropology and some closely related disciplines. These essays are theoretical and methodological inquiries intended to make explicit the relevance of the detailed studies that follow. We decided it might be better to separate the discussion of this relevance from the case studies themselves so that the argument could be made in more depth and less repetitively. The case studies thus must stand in the context of this Introduction, and vice versa.

The studies are presented in four groups. First (part 2), we have two studies of highly crafted cultural artifacts: commercials (Beeman, chap. 3) and James Bond movies (Drummond, chap. 4). Here the attention is on products in which nothing is left to chance. We know that every object appearing on the screen has been specifically chosen, that every word of an ad has been carefully edited. In the process, some of the dominant themes that have always been associated with America—individualism, choice, progress through machines, the state and the corporation—are particularly clearly articulated. And yet even here uncertainty and the transformative quality of cultural performances affirm themselves. The advertiser is never sure of the power of a campaign. The ensemble of myths to which people in the United States respond presents a complex, shifting image that does not allow for much standing still. In the second set of essays (part 3), attention is on improvising in difficult situations. These chapters look at people as they try to deal with the identifications the culture offers: as "American" and as "ethnic." "How can one affirm one's Americanness when one is identified as an 'ethnic'?" Singer asks (chap. 5). "What can one do to reaffirm one's ethnic separate-ness when one is in danger of disappearing from the general conscious-ness? What will work?" ask Myerhoff and Mongulla (chap. 6). The chapters in part 4 deal with temporary resolution of paradoxical aspects of American culture. What does one do with politicoreligious disagreements if one's reading of the Bible says recourse to the law is sinful (Greenhouse, chap. 7)? What can one do *not* to affirm one's whiteness in an integrated college dorm (Moffatt, chap. 8)? Greenhouse details the process that silenced certain Southern Baptists as they struggled with the dual prescription of "freedom of expression" and "consensus." Moffatt observes what happens when the prescription for "freedom of assembly" and "universal openness" (nonsegregation) have to be followed at the same time in a racially mixed dormitory.

Part 5 consists of two chapters detailing the *effect* of culture on two types of moments in everyday life when no time is given for crafting or improvising, when tensions cannot be resolved, when blows must be taken. The chapter by Canaan (chap. 9) shows how the American symbolizing of sexuality is lived by teenage girls in a suburban school as they continue the old struggle with slippery definitions of

legitimate and illegitimate sexual acts. The chapter by Varenne (chap. 10) analyzes a *few* seconds of conversation when an invitation to "drop in anytime" that is not made is rejected. This analysis suggests a method of demonstrating the basic assumption of all anthropology, the assumption that culture does organize behavior in its details. Each essay can be read by itself. Our intention, however, is to present a collective effort to which each contributes something. We do hope that they will be read together for what they say about the enterprise as a whole. This Introduction, the brief introductions to each part, and the Epilogue (Caughey), are intended to encourage a holistic reading. The effort presented, obviously, is still an early one. Much remains to be done. Much, however, has been accomplished already.