Along Many Trails -- To a Single Destination

J. Milton Yinger

King 106 - 3:00 p.m.

After more than half a century of lecturing here and there one might suppose that I would find this occasion, so friendly and pleasant, a challenge but not a great puzzle. The Oberlin library, after all, is a kind of second home to me. The problem is the topic. I'm going to talk about the work of a fellow whom I know quite well, but from whom I have never before stepped Go to try to see him from a bit of distance, to "review the bidding" so to speak.

I. Wanderings

Although I have spent a large share of my professional life at Oberlin, both before that and during that period there has been a lot of wandering. By the time I had finished high school I had lived in seven cities: Quincy, Nashville, St. Louis, Greenville, Grand Rapids, South Haven, and Three Rivers. In how many states and countries had I lived? One.

While moving around I was also shifting my interests, trying on various careers for size -- although not thinking of it in that way at first.

Ages 10-12 Architect.
Ages 13-16 Mathematician--especially algebra, which I found as much fun as chess.
Ages 17-18 An open slate during my first two years of college.
Age 19 ff. Sociology, or perhaps economics (a joint major in college), or perhaps law, or perhaps music, as a singer.
Ages 21-22 At Louisiana State University -- a sociology graduate student; but there was still economics.
Ages 23-24 At the University of Wisconsin -- working on a Ph.D. in sociology, but there was anthropology, or perhaps social psychology, not to mention my old standby, economics. Minors in anthro. and econ.
Age 25 ff. With sociology degree in hand and an appointment in that field, the question was settled, but boundaries were easily crossed, into history, statistics, political science, social psychology, and anthropology and economics.

At DePauw, 1933-37, Frank Vreeland -- a young version of Thorstein Veblen -- with an added sense of humor -- and Lester Jones gave me a strong background in sociology, as A. A. Smith did in economics. Professor Jones introduced me to the work of E. A. Ross and John Gillin, his mentors at the Univ. of Wisconsin. Little did I imagine that I too would study with them -- taking their last seminars.

At LSU, 1937-39, sociology had been established only recently, but T. Lynn Smith had put together a fine faculty; and they paid me $50 a month. For a while Professor Smith was not sure of me: I had come into his office carrying a tennis racquet rather than a brief case; and I missed classes occasionally to join the opera chorus at the Conservatory, with some performances taking us to the Opera House in New Orleans. But he finally concluded that I was a serious student. Rudolf Heberle, with his heavy German accent, was an excellent teacher of theory -- of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and of his father-in-law T&#xfffd;nnies. H. M. McCracken was a superb teacher of economics, with whom I took three courses. Wilmoore Kendall had just returned from Oxford after a period as a Rhodes scholar. His political science seminar, with a rather strong Marxist slant, was exciting. He once asked me to review for the seminar two books by the "young agrarians" -- prominent southern literary writers and scholars. To my surprise, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks were sitting on the front row. They were among the authors of these two books and were rapidly establishing themselves as writers. I believe Professor Kendall wanted to make sure that my Yankee inclinations did not distort my review. As it turned out, Warren and Brooks were gentle and supportive.

At Wisconsin, 1939-41, the intellectual excitement was cranked up even higher. One year I served as research assistant to Wendell Bennett, a brilliant young anthropologist and the next year was the research assistant to Tom McCormick, an excellent, but inarticulate statistician. My major professors were W. W. Howells, in physical anthropology; Howard Becker, a converted industrial engineer, in theory; Hans Gerth, a German journalist turned sociologist, in social psychology and public opinion studies; and Selig Perlman, an impressive labor economist, friend and protege of John R. Commons, Oberlin graduate and briefly on the faculty here, long enough to teach the first courses in economics and sociology.

There was also a strong group of fellow graduate students, the most visible of whom was C. Wright Mills -- a brilliant, angry, articulate, driven scholar who became a hero of the left while at Columbia a few years later, a status that continued after his untimely death at age 45.

Most important for me, a few weeks after arriving in Madison I met the beautiful, vivacious, and talented Winnie

II. Field Theory

The variety of topics I have studies and the multi-leveled theoretical guidelines that appeal to me have remained constant. In its analytic mode, science seeks to isolate from the complex empirical world some law of relationship. These laws are obscured in the normal course of affairs, because different relationships operating simultaneously in the same setting offset, reinforce, or deflect one another, thus requiring the analytic procedures of research for their discovery. In another mode, I call it field theory, we look for some segment of the world as it exists and ask: what various processes are operative there and what are the consequences of their interaction?

I applaud and respect research that focuses on one level (biological, psychological, social, and cultural in the human sciences) provided there is full recognition of the analytic nature of the findings. The victories are in the analytic world of the scholar's creation.

Moreover, it is extremely difficult to isolate the effect of one of these levels from the confounding influence of the others, since they are blended in the empirical world. I'm puzzled about talk of a gene for crime, since crime is a culturally defined behavior. I'm puzzled by confident statements that X percent of intelligence is genetic, when the confounding effects of a mother's diet, and even a grandmother's, of the attitudes of teachers, of the cultural signals sent by playmates, of the quality of amenities and opportunities in neighborhood and home, etc., etc. have been left uninvestigated. Crude matching for social class will not solve the problem.

One of the critical tasks in social research is to establish "the time order of the variables." What came first in a set of co-existing variables? I'm reminded by some current research of the story of Abe Lincoln who came into the Illinois legislative hall with a bulge in his pocket. What is that, he was asked. A potato, Lincoln replied. But why carry a potato in your pocket? I have had no rheumatism since carrying it. Even more marvelous, the effect is retroactive. I had no rheumatism before carrying the potato. Needless to say, the time order of the variables is vastly important in questions of public policy as well as in research.

To indicate something of the way I arrived at field theory, I quote here several paragraphs that I wrote over 30 years ago. It will give you a guide to the way I have approached research in several areas.

After several centuries of development in physics, a field perspective has now perhaps become part of the world view of laymen. We require no serious effort of translation to realize that a lighter-than-air object rises, not simply because of its inner qualities, but because of the nature of its relationship to the environment. In a day of speculation about landing on the moon, even the more complex notion that the weight of an object itself is not intrinsic to it, but is a function of the object in the environment, may be part of common-sense thought.

Of greater potential significance for a science of human behavior is the development of a similar perspective in biology. The conception of the fixity of species was challenged in the nineteenth century and was decisively replaced by the theory of evolution. Thus a transaction between the organism and the environment was brought into the very process of inheritance.

Perhaps even more important for our purposes, however, has been the extension of this point of view to cell differentiation and other organic processes. Even that most stable unit of heredity, the gene, is know to be affected by powerful external agents and perhaps even by normal contact with one of its alleles (partner genes)..... Cells are known to be field determined. Their form and function are a result, not simply of inherited structure and capability, but of environmental influences as well.....

In his pioneering work on this question, Charles Child noted that some organisms could be so significantly changed by outside influences that "we should never recognize them as belonging to the same species, or in the more extreme cases, to the same class, or perhaps even the same phylum" as organisms developing under the usual conditions.

There are multiple possibilities in every cell and biological structure, particular ones of which are facilitated or drawn out by the environment. Transplant a cell in the early stages of its development (and in some instances, in later stages) from one tissue environment to another, and it will show characteristics appropriate to its new location.

Today we can read on this topic the elegant prose of Stephen Jay Gould, as in The Mismeasurement of Man: "Heritability does not mean inevitability."

My amateurish sampling of biological research did not lead me into field theory. I was already headed that way -- without knowing it -- in my undergraduate reading of George Herbert Mead, W. I. Thomas (both with Oberlin connections I later discovered), Charles H. Cooley ("self and society are twin-born"), and John Dewey. In graduate school I discovered that Emile Durkheim, that sociological super-patriot, had convincingly argued that society -- as a level of influence on human behavior -- could not be reduced (today we might say deconstructed) to biological and psychological factors.

Kurt Lewin's field theory, which I studies later, could not quite escape the limits of his psychological perspective, but his formula points us in the right direction: B = f(P, E). "The state of the person (P) and that of his environment (E) are not independent of each other."

Once into it, I found field theory everywhere. In proverbs: "One takes on the face of his enemy whether he wishes to or not." In literature: "But before I treat a patient like yourself I need to know a great deal more about him than the patient can always tell me. Indeed, it is often the case that my patients are only pieces of a total situation which I have to explore. The single patient who is ill by himself is rather the exception." Thus T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party, reflected a developing approach in social psychiatry, as in the work of Dorothea and Alexander Leighton (he, a psychiatrist turned anthropologist), Karen Horney, Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm, Rollo May. Similar approaches were found widely in anthropology, in the work of Ralph Linton, Ashley Montagu, George Devereux, and Ruth Benedict, among others. In philosophy there were compatible developments in the works of such writers as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Ludwig Binswanger.

I was carried to a frenzy of excitement -- if one can maintain a frenzy for a decade -- matching that of Midas with his gold. But I believed, and still believe, that I was finding real gold. Thanks to a Research-Status leave in 1963-64, I could calm down enough to write, Toward a Field Theory of Behavior: Personality and Social Structure.

How have these diverse interests and this multi-leveled theoretical approach spelled themselves out in my research? Although I have done some work in the sociology of education (Middle Start, with several Oberlin colleagues and students), and on socialization, my main studies have been in 1) the sociology of religion, 2) race and ethnic relations, and 3) countercultures. Here, a brief reference to each of these.

1. The Sociology of Religion

Flooded with discussions of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Marx, Troeltsch, and others in the seminars of Becker, Gerth, and Heberle, and sensitized by my family background, I found it natural to select the sociology of religion for my 1940-42 dissertation studies. In the dissertation I asked: How were religion and churches (not synonyms) involved in the economic and political struggles during the development of 16th and 17th century capitalism (something of a critique of Weber's famous thesis); in the shaping of economic ethics in the first decades of twentieth century America; and in public decisions by churches and religious leaders dealing with war. A common set of concepts, particularly "the dilemma of the churches," proved valuable in the interpretations of each of these topics, each examined as part of the study of Religion in the Struggle for Power.

Because it landed on an almost unoccupied field, my dissertation, published just one-half century ago, seemed to stimulate the development of the sociology of religion in the United States. (It is still in print.) It was followed by Religion, Society, and the Individual; Sociology Looks at Religion; and The Scientific Study of Religion. There are translations of some of these into French, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese.

Several times in my life I have been led -- no, coerced by expanding evidence -- into seeing similarities in broader and broader ranges of data. Looking at religions that at first and second and third glances seem very different, one finds evidence that the roots from which many of them grow are the endemic experiences of suffering, injustice, and meaninglessness. Religion, seen in this way, is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations (sometimes, often? enclosed in narrow boundaries). My research on this topic started in Oberlin, then expanded to eleven of the twelve Great Lakes Colleges consortium, and then -- thanks to a sabbatical -- to Japan, Korea, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. The papers that resulted (published in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion) aroused a lot of interest and a lot of controversy.

Religion seen in this way is a quest for a life that is "beyond tragedy," to use Reinhold Niebuhr's phrase, a citadel of hope built on the edge of despair. In the world religions this has sometimes meant the development of a polity and a theology beyond the reach of states -- a separation that is maintained only with great difficulty, as political struggles and conflicts in many parts of the world attest.

A variety of religious protest movements, despite their differences, share common elements. We need to look not only at their very different histories, myths, and metaphors, but at the somewhat similar experiences of oppression and cultural disarray. Today's liberation theology in Latin America and elsewhere, I would suggest, has some of the qualities of the Native American Ghost Dance, 1870-1890. History does not repeat itself, especially across great cultural divides, but neither does it leave us uninstructed about our own times.

Listen to the rather extravagant interpretation of James Mooney after his intensive study of the 1890 Ghost Dance, which he sees as one of a universal species of religious movements that seek to capture a lost Arcadia:

The lost paradise is the world's dreamland of youth. What tribe or people has not had its golden age, before Pandora's box was loosed? And when the race lies crushed and groaning beneath an alien yoke, how natural is the dream of a redeemer, an Arthur, who shall return from exile or awake from some long sleep to drive out the usurper and win back for the people what they have lost..... The doctrines of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew Messiah, the Christian millennium, and Hesunanin of the Indian Ghost Dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope and longing common to all humanity.

I suspect that we all have been made a bit dizzy by this climb up the abstraction ladder; but even so, Mooney can help us to see contemporary religious movements in a clearer light. We need to study much more carefully how a society and the various groups within it get from here to there culturally, how values evolve, and who suffers in the process. In commenting, in 1980, on the overpowering success of the Ayatollah Khomeini in winning support for his harsh repression, not only of Christians and Bahais, but of Sunni and Kurdish Muslims, Martin Marty observed that the Ayatollah had the Shah, "who imported but hoarded the best features of technology and left the oppressed with nothing but trampled customs and disintegrating culture."

2. Racial and Ethnic Relations

My professional interest in racial and ethnic relations came by only a few years after my interest in the anthropology and sociology of religion. But it emerged just as naturally out of my family background. The dedication in my most recent book, Ethnicity, is to George Daniel and Emma Bancroft Yinger, my parents. It reads: To GDY and EBY, who never knew a stranger. We lived in predominantly, even overwhelmingly White towns most of the time; but the world was my parents' parish. DePauw, in the 1930s, had a few Black students, but, again, was overwhelmingly White (and Protestant).

Two years in Baton Rouge, however, educated me rapidly on race relations. Two or three days after I had arrived in the city, an elderly Black man stopped me as we passed on the street and asked me a question I did not understand. "Sir?" I responded, wanting him to repeat his question. Instead, he turned and walked quickly away, almost in terror.

The race line was drawn in a very different way by my friends who for months referred to me teasingly and pleasantly as damn Yankee -- indicating that they used the abbreviation because I seemed to be a pretty good fellow. The race line was etched in class by Professor (Dean, Colonel) Fred Frey. He described his dismay at being seated, by alphabetical order, next to E. Franklin Frazier in two successive classes on the first day of graduate study at the University of Chicago. But the dismay faded; the world did not collapse; and in a few weeks they were good friends. Frazier went on to become an eminent sociologist.

course on racial and cultural relations.

Shortly thereafter there came another rather sharp transition. In the summer of 1944, Winnie and I became directors of a Quaker workcamp in the inner city of Indianapolis. (As an aside, let me say that Winnie has been a major participant in virtually everything I report here, by her multi-faceted support.) The group of workers was interracial and international; the area was almost completely Black. We worked with the skillful and dedicated Negro staff of Flanner House, headed by Cleo Blackburn. Our continuous contact with the residents of the neighborhood attracted city-wide attention. When the manager of a warehouse for a major department store, located near Flanner House, saw us working, day-in and day-out in the summer heat, he asked where we lived. He learned that we had two showers for the 24 or 25 of us and kindly offered to let the men use the showers in the warehouse. When reporting his monthly expenses to the store's controller, he duly recorded: "50 cents for soap for Quakers." The figure was somehow reported in the daily paper. It is difficult to imagine a better way to get lighthearted yet serious attention for the activities of the work camp.

We followed this work camp experience with several summers as leaders in Quaker international student seminars, 1948-54. Week-long visits from outstanding leaders in conflict resolution and race relations helped to create strong bonds among the international and interracial groups of students. In trips around the regions where the seminars took place we became, without realizing it, early participants in the emerging civil rights movement. In one setting, Native Americans, Latinos, and Anglos came together for conversations and fellowship. They went away asking: Why have we not done this before? With a little gentle persuasion we were permitted to take the group into the swimming pools of the University of Tennessee and the city of Oak Ridge, along with many other people. It was the first time, the managers told us, that the pools had been "desegregated" (1953).

During those years, the scholarly field of race relations, prejudice, and discrimination was developing rapidly: Myrdal, An American Dilemma, 1944; Gordon Allport; Ruth Benedict; St. Clair Drake, Charles S. Johnson; Carey McWilliams; Robin Williams, Jr.; Oliver Cox; John Dollard; Allison Davis; and many others were building on the important but rather sparse work of earlier decades. This new wave developed during or in the years just after World War II. My first paper was published in 1946.

Another turning point was our move to Oberlin in 1947. George E. Simpson joined the faculty at the same time. Within weeks, it seems, we had plans for a joint volume -- he to examine the circumstances of Black Americans, I to develop a theoretical statement about discrimination and prejudice -- their sources and strategies for their reduction. This took a while: the first edition appeared in 1953, and fifth in 1985. I believe it is fair to say that Racial and Cultural Relations: The Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination has had an impact on teaching, research, and policy in the field. We followed this by editing the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science in 1957 and again in 1978, both times with collected papers on Native Americans, and with articles in several different journals.

Prof. Simpson has continued with excellent research on Black Americans. (America, in his work, includes Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, as well as the U.S.) My work on this topic includes Middle Start: An Experiment in the Educational Enrichment of Young Adolescents. Kiyoshi Ikeda, Frank Laycock, Stephen Cutler, and I, along with a dozen students research assistants during a ten-year period, studied the effects of a rich summer program here at Oberlin on the educational attainments of middle school students from St. Louis, Cleveland, Lorain, Elyria, and Oberlin. They were compared with matching students from the same schools. The program had a modest but statistically significant positive influence.

During those years, and since, I have written A Minority Group in American Society; Anti-Semitism; numerous articles; and, most recently, Ethnicity: Source of Strength? Source of Conflict? -- a theoretical work drawing material from many lands.

Throughout these years my interest has been stimulated by brief but compelling contacts with Ralph Bunche, Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson, and Martin L. King, Jr. I'm tempted to add Jesse Owens -- but that contact lasted only 6.2 seconds. More important were the many students and faculty at Oberlin who were also concerned with inequality and discrimination. To mention a few: Wade Ellis, Kiyoshi Ikeda, Booker Peek, Al McQueen, Eduardo Mondlane, Johnetta Betsch (Cole), Niara Sudarkasa (Gloria Marshall).

I can take time only to mention two topics in a theory of racial and ethnic relations. First, the cybernetic system of causes and effects of discrimination and prejudice: 1) The desire for economic and political advantage and power converges with 2) individual needs and anxieties which, together, create 3) the context for the development of stereotypes and distancing cultural norms. Out of these comes 4) discrimination, which is both a source and an effect of prejudice. Persisting discrimination leads to "institutional racism" (I prefer the term structured discrimination), the traditional, habitual, customary way of doing things. Also out of this set of forces come 6) various responses from target groups which, in part, reinforce and superficially confirm the system. Policies designed to change only one part of the system are bound to fail. That is particularly true of point 6, which is the favorite of many commentators today. Of the six blind men of Hindustan, the one who grasped the tail of the elephant had a good firm hold on a small part of the truth.

I want also to emphasize that there is a matching "system of equality," with the same six factors. Elements of such a system are found even in the most repressive systems, often in "underground railroads." It is essential that research and policy seek them out.

Second, I can only point to another major topic in racial and ethnic relations: assimilation-dissimilation. The blending of two or more groups into one or, the opposite, their continued or even growing separation, is of major importance in many -- perhaps most -- countries. These should be treated, in the first instance, as purely neutral concepts. We must think in terms of process. The process can be reversed.

Each of these statements applies also to the four factors which, together, make up assimilation-dissimilation:

Social structure--Integration
Culture--Acculturation (distinguish additive from substitutive)
Psychological elements--Identification (can this also be additive?)
Biological level--Amalgamation

3. Countercultures

As I pursued studies of sectarian movements, particularly, at first, those in 17th century England, the degree of their reversals of dominant values, as well as their opposition to structures of power, aroused my curiosity. Thus, without knowing it, I had developed in my mind the concept of countercultures during the period when I was working on my dissertation, 1940-42. Thereafter, scattered reading in philosophy, psychology, literature, history, and anthropology revealed the widespread interest in inversions, contradictions, oppositions. In the 1950s I was also intrigued by the way some groups of delinquents could be seen, not simply as individual deviants, but also as group-centered non-conformists, announcing and defending their deviance.

The history of Christianity is filled with countercultural movements: "It is written... but I say unto you." The Romans saw Christianity, or their caricature of it, as a complete contradiction of the dominant order. In the words of Celsus, in the first century: To them "the world's wisdom is evil, and the world's foolishness is insight." In time, countercultures hit Christianity. Heresy, antinomianism, gnosticism were endemic. To some Gnostics, sin is the road to salvation. They opted for outcasts and proclaimed themselves Cainites.

Christopher Hill entitled his study of 17th-century sects The World Turned Upside Down -- a phrase taken from Acts. Werner Stark, in his massive study of Christian history in the 1970s, spoke of sects as "typically contracultures."

I began to speak about these things in the late 1950s and published my first paper on the topic in the American Sociological Review in 1960. Within the next few years it was reprinted in fifteen anthologies and produced a steady stream of letters and papers from the United States and Europe.

Surely I need a definition here: Countercultures are all of those situationally created designs for living formed in contexts of high anomie and intrasocietal conflict, the designs being inversions of, in sharp opposition to, the historically created designs.

This was the topic of my presidential address to the American Sociological Association in 1977 and of a book published in 1982. In the book I developed further my field-theoretical approach to the sources of countercultures. Individuals vary in their tendencies (negative identities, Freud's underworld of the subconscious); structural conditions, demographics and economics help shape the context; even the prevailing culture plays a part. Someone has said that every country gets the socialist party it deserves. (Russia got Lenin and Stalin; the U.S. got Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas). It is equally true that every society gets the countercultures it deserves, for they do not simply contradict, they also express the situation from which they emerge -- pushing away from it, deploring its contradictions, caricaturing its weaknesses, and drawing on its neglected and underground traditions. (On these matters, the U.S. has not been so lucky).

If we think of countercultures as art forms we may find that, like other forms of art ranging from the sublime to the ugly, they highlight, dramatize, and anticipate drastic problems. Whether as "voices crying in the wilderness" or as symptoms of major disorders -- unintended warnings and illustrations of what may lie ahead -- countercultures require the most intensive study, not only by those whose aim and task it is to examine societies and to see them whole, but also by those who strive to improve them. We shall be fortunate if these are in many instances the same people. From even those countercultures that we deeply oppose, we may learn how to extract "honey from the weed, and make a moral of the devil himself."

IV. Teaching

Teaching has always been an important part of my professional life and I have always enjoyed it -- well, almost always. After some teaching at Wisconsin as an assistant instructor -- or whatever the lowest rung was called -- my first full-time job came rather suddenly in the middle of the academic year, December 1, 1941. A professor of sociology at Ohio Wesleyan University, a man of Hungarian background, was called to his embassy in Washington. I found myself facing five classes for the last quarter of the first semester, four more for the second semester, with one being a repeat. My salary was $1750 -- not per week! I prepared a magnificent lecture for the first class, Introduction to Anthropology. I delivered it at a speed about three times as fast as my predecessor's. There was no accent to the Ohio ears. The sentences all parsed. Every major topic in anthropology was covered. And I finished in 23 minutes. Not a question was asked. I believe I called the roll a second time -- to get better acquainted -- and dismissed the class 20 minutes early. That was never to happen again.

My theory has always been: think out loud in front of the students. Give them a sense of my own struggle with the complexity and often the ambiguity of a topic; and then listen to them. The best help I can give them, I believe, is to teach them to ask themselves powerful questions on important topics.

Teaching has never been in competition with research in my schedule. Each aided the other. They have been part of a single enterprise.

I have often tried to involve a class in a 50-minute piece of research. I would ask them, for example, to give their judgments, in writing, on the relative desirability of liberty, equality, and fraternity; then their estimate of the actual situation in the United States. They were asked to rank each on scales of 0 to 10. What exists? What should exist? This was done before my lectures on the topic; but on occasion I repeated the exercise after the lectures, facing all the ethodological hazards of before-after studies. You can probably reconstruct my lectures when I say that there was a slight shift downward in the estimates of the factual situation regarding all three values and a slight shift upward in the average judgment of what ought to exist on all three values.

In other classes I asked them simply to rank the three values. If the mean score was one, everyone had placed it first. Without exception, on a class but not on an individual basis, the ranking among white students was liberty (1.7), equality (2.0), and fraternity (2.3). Equality was ranked first, in every class, among Black students.

Needless to say, these results furnished ample opportunity for discussion of definitions, sources of data, classical interpretations, American stratification, and race relations.

In discussions of the "great books," "the canon" -- a good topic for a social scientist trying to understand a society -- a

I was reminded of this by V. S. Naipaul's description of a conversation he had had with a young poet from Java. The poet had had a modern education, with some influence from various cultural traditions, but he was quite unable to explain to his elegant, cultivated mother why he wanted to be a poet. Was she not proud that he wanted to be a poet, Naipaul asked him. She would have no sense of what it meant, was the poet's reply. The poet's mentor at the local university noted that he might try to explain it as poetry in the classical tradition, but his mother would find that absurd and reject it as an impossibility "because for the mother the epics of her country -- and to her they would be like sacred texts -- already existed, had already been written. They had only to be learned or consulted.... That particular book, it might be said, was closed: it was part of the perfection of her culture. To be told by her son... that he was hoping to be a poet would be like a devout mother in another culture asking her writer-son what he intended to write next, and getting the reply, 'I am thinking of adding a book to the Bible.'"

Surely there is some civilized space, in the United States and elsewhere, between the two extremes on this issue.

To Go to comments on teaching at Oberlin, I was startled to find, when I checked the records, that I had taught, in 40 years, 17 different courses -- several of them being seminars that I taught only once. Judging by the number and quality of my students, I must have been a good teacher -- but simply in the sense of quality-in, quality-out (the opposite of the garbage-in, garbage-out of the frustrated computer buff). In fact, the truth may be akin to the story of the farmer who, year after year, won prizes at the State Fair for the size and flavor of his watermelons. How do you do it, he was asked. What is the secret? "I don't know; I really don't know. I just step up to the field and throw the seed as far as I can. Then I run like hell to keep from getting tangled in the vines."

One of my greatest joys is to know what wonderful "watermelons" are being grown, across the U.S. and in Europe and Asia, by graduates of Oberlin.

V. Conclusion

For generations, perhaps for centuries, our literary thinkers have expressed the feeling that the world has lost its compass. As Walt Whitman put it: "Society waits unformed and is for a while between things ended and things begun." More poetically, Matthew Arnold wrote that "we are wandering between two worlds, one dead and the other powerless to be born." In a different mode, Durkheim revived the ancient concept of anomie -- without norms -- and examined its powerful impact on human life.

Although sweeping generalizations about cultural disarray, taken too literally, may be poor guides to our understanding of the human condition, they can, at least, compel us to look for major sources of our problems and to ask the right questions about them.

This is the way I assess the situation: Three interlocking problems of enormous importance command the world's attention and are likely to be at the top of the political-moral agenda for decades to come: 1) how to increase justice among societies, ethnic groups, races, classes, ages, sexes; 2) how to attain peace, the elimination of the use of organized and official violence as the way to attempt to settle disputes; and 3) how to protect the environment from over-crowding, the depletion of irreplaceable resources, and pollution.

Can the scholar be content with identifying key problems and seeking to understand them? In my judgment, no. Having noted three social scientific areas with which I have been concerned, and three major questions facing humankind, let me end with another triptych, borrowing the rhythm of Kant's famous statement: Conception without perception is blind; Perception without conception is empty.

Values without knowledge are blind.
Knowledge without values is empty.
Both without policies are futile.

That credo unites the diverse elements in my scholarly and social action efforts.

Quotations in this talk were taken from:

T.S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party.

James Mooney, The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890.

V.S. Naipaul, "Our Universal Civilization," The New York Review of Books, Jan. 31, 1991.

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