

Multiculturalism: An Anthropological Perspective

During a recent radio talk show on youth and the drug trade, the host's invited guests were young African-Americans. A woman caller suggested that all the black youths who sell drugs might agree to only sell them to white people (with intent to harm the "enemy") and use the profits to finance African-American communities. Her tone was calm, chilling, and she used Malcolm X ("By any means necessary") to justify her strategy. The talk show host, a self-proclaimed radical, was taken aback and strongly disagreed — he went into a long explanation about the difference between revolution and criminal violence. But the invited panel of young people did not hold the caller's idea in such aversion, one saying it bore further thought.

For the caller and that youth, the line between black and white was clearly and starkly drawn, and whites were seen as enemies responsible for the continued oppression of African-Americans. But in many instances, these cultural lines are fuzzier and the definition of who we are (even as opposed to who they are) is fluid and situational. On the same talk show, on another occasion, a heated debate took place about whether or not African-American or African was the best term to use to describe people of African descent living in the United States. In another instance a caller said: "We are the dash in African-American."

In Montgomery County, Maryland, where I live and I conduct fieldwork, issues of group definition are salient foci of controversy. The county, until recently, was largely socially homogenous and its residents among the wealthiest in the country. But rapid economic growth has led to significant demographic and social change. The newest immigrant populations are people from Central and South America, and Asia. They have a range of income levels and settlement patterns within the county. The needs of these growing populations are stressing county services.

The prestigious school system has become one of the major arenas for social and political conflict as different civic and activist groups (some organized along ethnic lines) demand that the school system remedy inequalities in the delivery of education to "minority" students (inequalities evidenced by a persistent gap in performance between "white" students and "black" and "Hispanic" students).

Despite various attempts by the Board of Education to address this issue under an initiative labelled "Priority Two" — the improvement of black and Hispanic student performance — school officials have so far been unable to close the gap. In 1989, a growing coalition of Asian civic groups demanded that Asians be included in the definition of "minority" under Priority Two, and finally Native Americans (a small population in the county) also were added. Meanwhile, the whole notion of designating certain groups as "minority" has come under attack (by people in the minority community and by the newly appointed superintendent, an African-American). Meanwhile, the school system is proceeding with efforts to revise its curriculum to become more "multicultural."

As an anthropologist engaged in the discussion of multiculturalism, I am troubled by the facile identification of groups, and by the perceived lines of division. What troubles me is not the "multi" part of multiculturalism, but the "culture" part. For many people, a culture is a closed system of shared meanings and significant symbols with easily identified boundary markers. Anthropologists have shared in this form of identification, especially when their primary objects of study were people considered peripheral to the industrialized world — the so-called tribal people. Our ethnographies bore definitive titles of definitive groups — the Dinka, the Yuqui, the Mundurucu, the Nuer, and so on.

But with time as our analysis became more sophisticated, as we acquired more evidence and a broader historical perspective, and as we confronted the fact that the people we studied were not isolated populations, we could not cling to clear-cut definitions of cultural entities. Some began to realize that groups previously characterized as homogenous through shared cultural norms were divided (perhaps most fundamentally by gender) and that rather than shared norms, cultural values were oft times contested, and constantly in flux. This complicated our methodological approach because if cultures were not closed systems then how could we study them as "wholes" and how could we compare cultures? There has been no consensus on this, but the debate has spurred new kinds of research questions and new units of analysis.

Yet, despite the awareness that culture and all societies

The political manipulation of ethnic identity is problematic precisely because the cultural essence on which affiliation is formed is variable and ambiguously bounded. So, returning to Montgomery County, the alliance of Asians under one ethnic label masks a range of diverse experiences based on national origins (Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, etc.), class distinctions, and generational differences. While unity might prevail in one arena, in other arenas conflict rules (for example, in Asian families, between parents and children who develop different conceptions of what it means to be Asian). And the debate in the African-American community over whether or not the label "Minority" ought to be discarded is related to class distinctions and political alignments within the community.

It would be unwise, however, to dismiss ethnicity as a purely political phenomenon. As with race, the social construction of boundaries has real impact. The category Asian which officially extends to Indians as well as persons of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian origins, does encompass a lived common experience — especially an experience of discrimination. Take the case of the wealthy Indian family I met in the Indian grocery store who bitterly described their son's exclusion from the soccer team because he was "too dark." There are also real differences in the organization of family life, allocation of resources, and the division between labor and leisure time which significantly affect the way in which different ethnic groups become incorporated into American social and economic life. Understanding which differences have significant impact and under what conditions social identities are reformulated and manipulated is an important research task.

Multiculturalism. This phenomenon is the latest incarnation of the ongoing public discourse over what it means to live in a complex society, a society of plural forms of cultural expression affected by unequal distribution of power. The debate over multiculturalism occurs in many different arenas — educational institutions, the work place, among policy makers and in the mass media, and in one form or another worldwide. Perhaps its most striking aspect is the widespread resistance to the notion that cultural diversity should be acknowledged and encouraged. Such a view is evident in the outcry against the changing of literary canons to include so-called "non-western" authors, in the resistance of predominantly white parents to the concessions made towards immigrant children in public schools (i.e. bilingual education), in the attempts to exclude "others" from national citizenship (for example, movements in the United States and Europe to limit immigration and to expel outright some immigrants). Resistance to cultural diversity on the part of those with political and economic power in turn leads to further consolidation of ethnic boundaries by those without power. Thus the continued discrimination, both economic and social, against African-Americans and

the erosion of civil rights gains has been partly responsible for the emergence of "Afrocentrism," and a growing clamor for segregation by blacks themselves.

It is the insistence on perceiving culture as neatly bounded that has brought us to the perilous position where a new world order of global peace is juxtaposed against endemic local violence of a most pernicious kind. Anthropologists should advocate a form of multiculturalism which regards the flow of cultural ideas and forms as primary. This would force people to confront the artificiality of cultural boundaries and perhaps make them more self-aware as they choose social identities. Anthropologists, in accordance with the professional ethical standards they have adopted, should also speak out vigorously against the continued use of phenotypic or ethnic variation for political discrimination and oppression.

Anthropology reminds us that it is the plasticity of culture and the ability of humans to rapidly adopt new innovations that enables us to succeed as a species. We depend on variation and innovation at all levels — within and between cultures. Humans must continually test, reshape, and stretch cultural forms, and create differences to survive.

It is at the points of contact between diverse cultures that the greatest amount of creative ferment goes on. This is evident particularly in artistic expression; the influence, for example, of African-American gospel and blues music or Rock and Roll and other contemporary music. It is also evident in material life, as for example during the Columbian exchange when new world flora and fauna (both wild and domesticated) were introduced into Europe, Africa and Asia and vice versa, changing forever the way we all live. Today, some of the most exciting literature and music comes from people who consider themselves "transnational" or "transcultural" (e.g. the new "immigrant" literature or world-beat musicians). Today too, some scientists believe that the best hope for protecting fragile ecosystems lies in creatively combining advanced scientific technology with time-tested natural resource management strategies of the indigenous people. We should celebrate these processes that can lead us to cross boundaries rather than fear them. This kind of creative expression is the true form of multiculturalism, and our best hope if we are to survive in the centuries to come.

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The New Wave of American Hate Crime Legislation

Since 1980 there has been a steady movement among American states to criminalize, recriminalize, and increase punishments for intentionally injurious conduct motivated by certain types of prejudice and hate. Most of this targeted conduct is already covered by "generic" crime categories, but the new hate crime genre splinters those categories to create a new family of specialized crimes.

The new hate crime legislation needs to be distinguished from an older genre of federal and state criminal law dating back to Reconstruction. Those laws were aimed explicitly against the Ku Klux Klan and other private paramilitary organizations conspiring to violate the rights of black people. In contrast, the current wave of hate crime legislation has not primarily been motivated by *organized* hate groups, but by unorganized acts of individuals or groups of individuals. In other words, the new legislation is not directed at systematic persecution, but at ordinary crimes motivated by certain odious biases.

What accounts for the proliferation of hate crime laws? To what extent are these laws consistent with traditional criminal law principles, to what extent do they represent a departure or innovation? Given that most crimes are motivated by objectionable attitudes and values, what is the justification for singling out certain attitudes and values for special treatment? I will not attempt to answer to these questions definitively, only to suggest that they are more difficult than they might first appear.

What Accounts for the New Wave of Hate Crime Legislation?

The long-term impetus for the 1980s hate crime legislation undoubtedly is the American civil rights movement that, since World War II, pressed forward the interests and aspirations of one group after another — blacks, women, prison inmates, the physically and mentally handicapped, and, most recently, gays and lesbians and undocumented aliens. As the civil rights movement has gained strength and legitimacy, minority groups have become increasingly committed to and skilled in asserting group rights. Not surprisingly, more individuals have come to see themselves (or at least present themselves) as members of disadvantaged or victimized minority groups. American society has experienced a proliferation of group consciousness, and American politics has become increasingly dominated by explicit competition and conflict among groups. Thus, Arthur M. Schlesinger,

Jr., has recently spoken of "the disuniting of America."

The perception that hate crime is increasing has also contributed to the new wave of legislation. The advocates of the new genre of hate crime legislation insist that the United States is experiencing a rising tide of religious, racial, ethnic and homophobic violence. But the existence of such a crime wave has not been clearly established. American crime statistics are notoriously unreliable. In recent decades, we have seen claims about crime waves deflated by systematic study, like the near hysteria over missing and kidnapped children, and the wildly exaggerated claims about increases in crime resulting from "addiction" to various psychoactive drugs.

I do not mean to suggest that the crime statistics provided by civil rights and advocacy groups are consciously inflated or necessarily inaccurate, only that the perception of a crime wave may owe as much to increasing sensitivity as increasing violence. What appears to be a "crime wave" may be explained in part by a greater willingness to regard and report certain crimes as bias-related, and by a better system for collecting and recording information about these offenses. The current wave of hate crime legislation may thus be a response to a *growing intolerance* of discrimination, negative stereotyping and hate mongering, rather than, or as well as, to increases in the frequency and virulence of racial, religious, and homophobic violence.

Interpreting Hate Crime Laws that Recriminalize or Increase Punishment for Already-Criminal Behavior

Hate crime legislation is comprised of a family of laws that includes reporting statutes, civil rights laws, new substantive crimes, and sentencing laws. I will focus on laws that prohibit already-criminal behavior motivated by racism, homophobia, and other biases, and laws that raise penalties for present criminal offenses motivated by those biases. These laws raise two critical issues: (1) which bigotries are covered, and (2) how much wrongful motivation must be proven?

(1) Which Bigotries Are Covered?

All hate crimes cover offenses motivated by racial, religious, and ethnic prejudices. Several state hate crime statutes and pending bills include prejudice based upon sexual orientation. Some states also cover crimes motivated by bias based upon gender, age, and mental and physical handicap.