



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 5
Issue 2 1978

Article 7

1-1-1978

Pedants and Potentates: Robert Redfield at the 1930 Hanover Conference

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Robert Redfield

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CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATIONPEDANTS AND POTENTATES: ROBERT REDFIELD AT THE 1930
HANOVER CONFERENCE

In 1925, the newly organized Committee on Problems and Policy of the two year old Social Science Research Council met with a group of psychologists at Hanover, New Hampshire. The opportunity for discussion of common problems was so fruitful that a larger conference was held there the following year--at which Bronislaw Malinowski expounded the virtues of functionalist anthropology to a receptive audience of American social scientists. For the next few years, until the diversification of Council activities and the onset of economic depression combined to bring them to an end, the so-called "Hanover Conferences" provided, in the words of Charles Merriam, "an environment very favorable to leisurely reflection on the significant methods and interrelations of fundamental questions in the social field" (SSRC 1927:12-13). Providing the conditions of "new contacts, new insights, new integrations, new valuations and new ways . . . of social advance," they were "the chief vehicle" of one of the Council's major achievements: "the breaking down of excessive compartmentalization" in the social sciences (SSRC 1934:6). Like many other academic meetings, however, the Hanover Conferences had other less explicit functions, the most important of which was to provide an arena in which the academic social scientific elite and the representatives of large-scale philanthropy active in the social sciences could discuss research strategies and establish funding priorities (cf. Karl 1974:153).

In 1930, Robert Redfield, who had just published Tepoztlan and was embarking on his extended research on culture change in Yucatan, was invited to Hanover by his Chicago colleague Edward Sapir, one of the members of the Conference inner circle. Redfield's refreshing observations on what was in fact his own entree into the upper echelons of American social science are preserved in a series of letters he wrote to his wife Margaret Park Redfield, from which the following excerpts are taken with the permission of James Redfield and the Special Collections Department of Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. The mimeographed proceedings of specific conferences exist in many major libraries where they were deposited by individual participants (e.g., SSRC 1930). The full set are no doubt preserved at the Social Science Research Council. Analysis of these and other materials analogous to Redfield's letters would surely cast important light on an important episode in the history of American social science. (G.W.S.)

Thursday morning

Somewhere between Albany and Springfield. . . . There was much conversation last night and after Kimball Young and I left, Sapir and Lasswell kept it up till midnight. How those two can talk, especially Lasswell! I feel very poorly equipped in this company. They are so wise in the ways of the academic world, and make so many brilliant suggestions. I am never able to contribute any brilliant suggestions. I don't even answer questions adequately, for while I am considering the question, they answer it for me and pass on to something else. I do not feel completely at ease in the company of such scintillating intellects.

Friday morning

. . . The place is overrun with pedants and potentates. The potentates are the executive secretaries of the big foundations--collectively they represent huge--staggering--amounts of money that has been set aside for research. The pedants have invited the potentates so that the potentates may see how pedants do their most effective thinking, and how they arrange to spend that money. But no one mentions money, one speaks of "research," "set-up" and "significant results." Golly, its awful. There are about seventy here in all. The Social Science Research Council pays their fares, and boards them, and feeds them, and washes their clothes, and gives them cards to the golf club, and then expects them to produce Significant Results.

I see Judd (School of Education) crossing the street. On the verandah under the tall colonial portico, Walter Rodgers is talking to Robert Lynd. There is a special conclave of lawyers: Bigelow is here, and the Deans of many another law school, and Judge Cardozo is expected.

Thus do I touch the skirts of the Olympians.

5:30 Friday evening

This morning was held the first session of the "COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH IN ACCULTURATION AND PERSONALITY." A last-minute change in program brought it about that my scheduled remarks on the Yucatan project were postponed till tomorrow or the next day. Sapir asked me to take notes, and as I was too ignorant and slow to make any contributions to the discussion, I was glad to have something to do. I just sat and took notes.

It is rather amusing to watch the Effective Minds in action, but also a little depressing, like watching Shaw's he-ancients. Besides the psychological-psychiatric-anthropo-sociological committee of mine, three visitors were there, distinguished educators (Judd was one). They all wore glasses, mustache and small pointed beard, and an intellectual expression. They were so alike they reminded me of naive efforts to portray the Trinity.

The psychologists run to fancy eye-glasses. Allport wore yellow glasses. Gardner Murphy wore violet glasses. Sapir has the usual white glasses, but they are new bi-focals.

The discussion centered around the W. I. Thomas project to study crime and insanity among the Scandinavians, and the Lawrence Frank proposal to bring foreign students to a great seminar to train them to make standardized studies of their own cultures.

If I were more courageous, I would enter into these discussions, because the only words you have to know are "approach" and "set-up."

At dinner it was a relief to turn from the he-ancients to the waitresses, who are young and in many cases pretty, and no doubt pre-occupied with simpler problems and more near at hand.

After dinner (at the Inn--much very good food) Kimball Young and I went to the country club, a half a mile away, borrowed some clubs, and started to play golf. After six holes a hard shower came up, and we returned to the clubhouse. But I enjoyed it. Kimball Young is a breezy person, not a he-ancient, and very good company.

I understand that all the members of this committee were selected by Lynd, except Young and myself, whom Sapir added.

Sunday evening

In not many minutes Dr. Sapir is going to deliver a lecture in this room; if I hurry I can get this letter written before he begins.

Where was I? Oh yes, last night Isaiah Bowman delivered a talk on geography as a social science. It was pretty awful claptrap, and as Bowman is an aggressive, not very tactful person, the others were laying for him, and there was a good deal of bickering not too well clothed in the subtleties of academic etiquette. It went on and on till eleven o'clock came. Then I hurried to the dormitory, and tumbled into bed. But Young, Lasswell, and some others wanted to work off their excitement and sense of ridicule, which they did, across the hall, with the help of some gin and ginger ale, and the racket kept up till late.

The session of the Committee this morning was quite interesting, especially a rather sharp conflict between the psychometric-statistical viewpoint on the one hand, and the psychiatric-sociological view on the other. The principal psychiatrist present is Harry Stack Sullivan, a droll person, and interesting. He is another one, like Sapir and Lasswell, with the gift of tongues. When the three of them get together the polysyllabic confluences are amazing. I have found Sullivan's talk highly interesting, giving me glimpses into a field I know nothing about.

After a very large and very excellent Sunday dinner at the attractive [Hanover] Inn pictured above [on the letterhead], and the aforementioned conversation with Sullivan, I played tennis with Lasswell.

He is much better than I, and he beat me in straight sets. It was grand for me--it is fun to butt oneself against someone stronger--one can let oneself go utterly. I ran him around a little at times, and he was surprised to see me not totally infirm. It is amusing to see how he conceived me, and how playing tennis with him made him alter his conception of me. Lasswell is a sort of all-around fair-haired lad, with mental brilliance, physical effectiveness, and the most unrestrained self confidence. . . . The talk is about to begin. Have to stop.

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