

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20007

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Mr. T. Leonard Mikules
11 Cathedral Street
Annapolis, Maryland

Dear Leonard,

I should apologize for my delay in answering your note of 26 January, but since you are well acquainted with the academic rat-race of oral and other examinations in which we live at this time of year, I shall not try to justify my delay. You asked for a copy of the speech I gave at the Local chapter of the American Studies Association in November. Unfortunately, I do not ever write out such lectures and thus have no copy, but I shall give you the gist of it, because there should be a record of it for my own files as well.

The title was "Changing cognitive systems as a unifying technique in American Studies". I sought to show that historical changes in the cognitive systems of Americans would provide a helpful method for unifying the study of American history, literature and philosophy, which is the aim of the association. My interest in the subject arose from a life-long study of cognitive systems of man throughout history.

A cognitive system could be defined thus: every people, in order to think about its experiences and to communicate about them, must structure these experiences. At a minimum this process means that the culture imposes on its experiences a system of categories and a system of values for these categories. Thus a system of cognition consists of categorization and valuation applied to experience. Since experience is existential in the sense that it is dynamic and unique, with each event occurring at a specific point in time, space, abstraction, social and personal context, and can be understood in interior consciousness and communicated to others only if it is classified into some kind of classification, such a cognitive system is necessary if man is to be human in the sense that he is both aware and communicative with others. Yet, because that cognitive system is subjective and conventional (within the social and linguistic system which created it), it becomes the frame-work within which the people of that society experience life and it is a screening barrier, which prevents them from experiencing those things for which no provision exists within their cognitive system. At times this means that a cognitive system becomes a barrier to those experiences which are necessary to the very basic needs of humans, and the members of the society abandon their society's cognitive system, leaving it as an untenanted culture, as the Christians and others did with Classical culture in the period from AD 200 to 950, when a totally new cognitive (based on hierarchy and quite different values) replaced the dualistic and paralysed cognitive system of Classicism. In turn, the Western cognitive system became ossified about 1300, and was unable to continue on in its growth along the lines of Western life as embodied in the intrinsic nature of the Christian revelation, and turned back to the Classical example, whose inability to deal with the basic human problems had been fully revealed a thousand years before. (The mark of this return is to be seen in such events as the turn to Roman law, the refusal to go on to philosophic nominalism from moderate realism, the failure to escape from the inhibiting influence of two valued Greek logi-

which made it impossible to introduce motion and change into the Western vision of reality and thus led to the struggle with Galileo and, above all, with Darwin, and the introduction of duality and absolutism into the medieval pluralist relativism).

A cognitive system structures reality and thus limits human experience within that culture, so that the members of that culture cannot become aware, think about, or communicate about what is excluded. On the whole, individuals socialized in a culture do not deal with actuality at all but deal with their society's cognitive system's structuring of actuality. This process is established in any individual chiefly through adopting the language of his culture, since any language has an unstated assumed cognitive implied in it. For example, European languages, by organizing action into past-present-future in the verb system make time and this structuring of time part of the process by which these language-users structure experience. On the other hand, Bantu-speakers use verb systems based on completed and uncompleted action. We now structure time into two (Greek 2-valued logic again), past and future, with the present simply the dimensionless division between these two, but the Bantu structures time with a broad extended duration of the present, a fairly long past, but an almost dimensionless future. As a result, the future-preference of our value-system (under which we are prepared to make almost any present sacrifice for the sake of some hypothetical future benefit; this is at the base of our religious system and from it came the base for saving and capital-accumulation in our economic system) is not compatible with the present preference of the Bantu, or the average American urban negro, so that our social and economic way of life cannot be exported to either of them.

In a similar way, we divide the single continuum of color in the rainbow into 6 divisions with green and blue as separate colors, and we, from our background in a temperate well-watered climate see a beautiful scene as a contrast of greens and blues, ~~travelling~~ travelling thousands of miles to see a view which consists of four bands of these: a foreground of green, probably the nearer shore of a lake; a band of blue, water; beyond that (which in a picture will be higher) a band of green (probably the farther shore of the lake) and, above that, the blue sky. Thus a beautiful scene to us is four bands of alternating green and blue, but to an African (or a Navahoe) this would be dull, since it would be all one color, and his idea of beauty consists of contrasts in the longer-wave end of the spectrum (red-orange-yellow-brown) where he divides up the spectrum into smaller and more numerous divisions than we do.

In a similar way, we divide the continuum of states of water into five (ice, snow, slush, water, steam), while the Esquime divides snow alone into about 52 divisions based on what it is adapted to in his cultural usage. Thus when he looks at snow he does not see what we see, just as we in DC. do not see the same thing as the man in Stowe, Vermont, sees, when we look at snow, altho we do use the same word for it.

The dimensions to which a society's cognitive system is applied are numerous and include, as well as those mentioned, space, nature, human nature (such as body and soul or body-emotions-reason, etc.), security and many others. In the middle ages we divided the individual life cycle into only two parts (Greek two-valued logic again): child and adult, with the division about 3 years. Today the most important stage is adolescence, which the middle ages did not recognize at all. (See Philippe Aries' paperback "Centuries of Childhood"). Today we have at least 8 or 9 stages, like many African tribes where these are institutionalized often with crisis or initiation ceremonies as transition points.

The study of these changes would provide a unifying principle for American studies, especially if we recognize that our increasingly complex social structure is creating different cognitive systems for the various classes. Shifts both in structuring time and space (such as shifts from the

agricultural year and the farmer's day, both based on the sun, to our abstract division of time for urban, commercial, future preference living (a change which the rural negro cannot make with facility, especially with his African background), and the shift from human experience to relations with objects or abstractions from the older emphasis on relations with nature and the recent emphasis on inter-personal relations (again, a movement toward an African form of life pattern) among our young people. In this process both nature and weather have been driven farther from immediate human experience, and the effort to recapture these has become one of the chief aims of the new leisure.

The Vision which we once had of the American class structure has changed steadily, most recently from a ladder to a kind of planetary system centered on govern, power.

Most of our literature from about 1900 to about 1940 was an attack on the middle-class cognitive system (future preference, endlessly expandible material demand, external, material status symbols, psychic anxiety, etc.), but since 1940 most of our literature has been simply a verbalization outside our cognitive system and outside of middle-class values, as protest against these and as a rejection of all the cognitive structure which makes thought and communication possible within our society. This began with the praise of violence in social Darwinism and works such as Sorel's Reflections on Violence. It culminated in the theatre of the Absurd and the meaningless poetry and painting of today, which reject meaning by rejecting all context.

This rather chaotic flood of ideas, some of which are undoubtedly obscure because they are too briefly stated, will give you some idea of the value of the study of changing cognitive systems in American studies. I could sum up these uses in five headings:

1. As a unifying method for American studies, since all would have to analyse in terms of experience, categories, and symbols.
2. as a method for studying social change by studying the process by which individuals are socialized in American society in various times, including the use of such underused sources as educational history, history of the family, the role of literature as both a reflexion of life and a substitute for living, and the verbalization of philosophy, as well as providing a new approach to innovation in American life, especially the process by which each generation rejects at least part of its parents' outlook.
3. as a technique for getting behind all cognitive systems to the actuality of human experience.
4. as a technique for obtaining originality in scholarly works, since the "originality" of most of these does not rest in any new discoveries but in expressing in new cognitive terms old actualities.
5. as a valuable technique for dealing with American social problems, such as poverty, racial issues, or war and peace, most of which are rooted in epistemological failures.

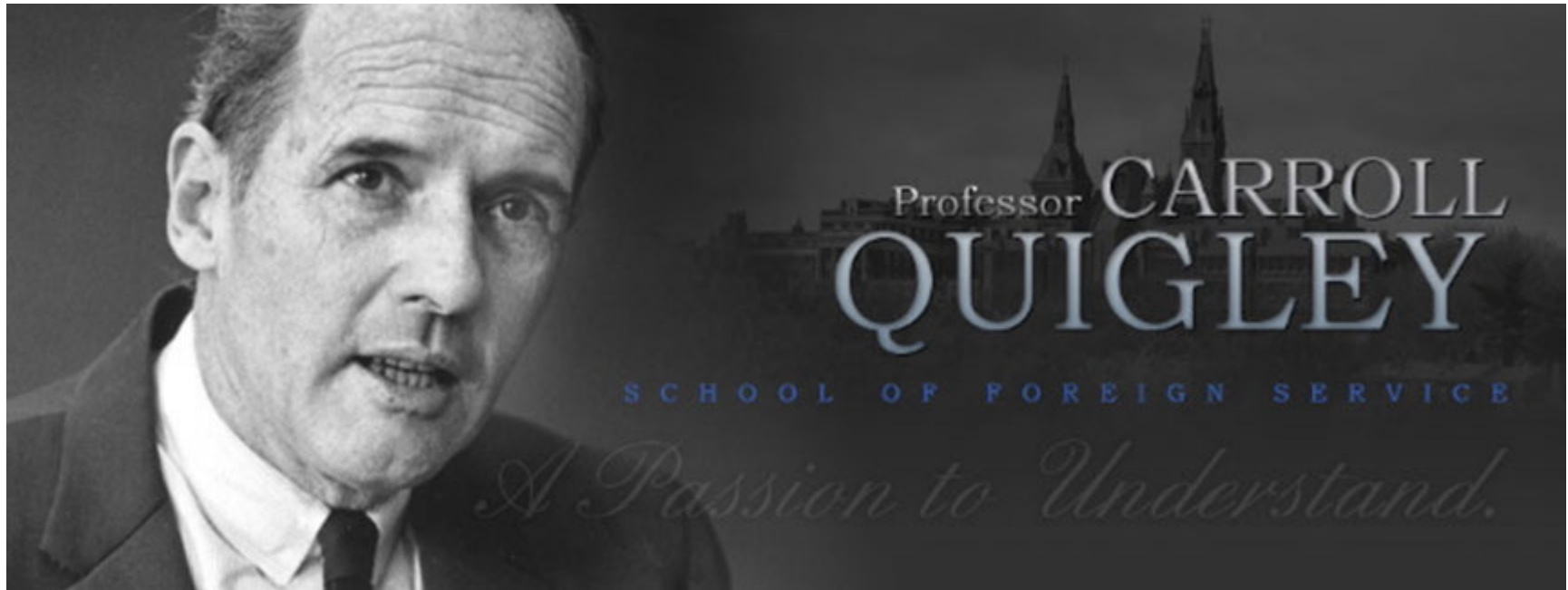
Please excuse the haste and errors of this letter. I have no stenographic help and I work poorly on a machine. To reduce errors I'll send you a Xerox copy.

Best wishes to you and to Roberta; I am glad that you are enjoying semi-retirement.

Very truly,



END



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