

The Importance of People

William Van Jil

The Remarkable Culture of the American Educators

"FEW MORE fascinating cultures exist than that of the American Educators," said the anthropologist to his colleague.

The two anthropologists were deep in their favorite leather chairs at the Explorers' Club. They had been trading information on tribal customs they had found at the far ends of the earth. The roaring blaze in the great stone fireplace was fed steadily with massive logs. From the paneled walls, masks used in primitive ceremonials stared down unblinkingly.

"As you well know," continued the speaker, "some of America's greatest anthropologists have applied the anthropological approach to American society as a whole. Others have studied isolated American sub-cultures, such as hill people of the Appalachians. But, until my study, occupational sub-cultures in modern America were uncharted anthropologically."

"How did you happen to choose the American Educators as the occupational sub-culture to be studied?"

"The same three standards I used in choosing South Seas cultures for inclusion in my recent book."

"Check my memory," said his companion, his eyes wandering to the primitive masks. "The tribe must have a special language for in-group communication."

"Right. The vocabulary and sentence structure of the upper class of the American Educators are particularly remarkable."

"The tribe must manifest characteristic in-group behavior."

"Right again. In local communities the American Educators, except for their gregarious upper middle class, are regarded as strange and special creatures. This, along with the rituals of their upper

class, may help explain the absorption of the American Educators in talking to themselves through manuscripts, magazines, and meetings."

"Third, the tribe must be suspicious of the out-group."

"Remarkable memory! 'Lay public' is the word this culture uses for the out-group. Roughly translatable as 'foreigners.'"

His companion lit a pipe. "You mentioned classes among the American Educators. What is their class system?"

"As a fellow anthropologist, you are of course familiar with the five (sometimes six) social classes documented by many able students of American society. A disreputable lower-lower class. A poor but honest upper-lower class. A solid, substantial lower-middle class. An energetic, influential upper-middle class. A prestige-bearing, established upper class. Approximately so, Herbert?"

"Over-simplified by you for the purpose of summary, of course."

The student of life among the American Educators leaned forward earnestly and tapped his listener's knee as he continued. "Herbert, I have made a tremendous discovery. The American Educators have an *educational* class system which parallels the *social* class system of their country!"

"How does one recognize an upper class American Educator?" asked Herbert, thoughtfully blowing pipe smoke at a particularly hideous tribal mask. "Upper *educational* class, that is."

"I found the habitat of the upper class American Educators in the universities," responded the anthropologist enthusiastically. Here the member of the upper educational class weaves elaborate theories, engages in research, initiates acolytes

to the upper class, produces tomes, and disputes the findings of other members of the upper class. It is believed in this class that the more incomprehensible the language and the fewer the readers, the more the result is to be judged profound and thus worthy of respect. Over the years, knowledge gathered by the upper class trickles down to the masses. The cultural lag is estimated at fifty to seventy-five years.



"The upper educational class is separated from the other classes by an extraordinary caste-like barrier termed Ph.D. and Ed.D. But so honorable is this caste-like distinction that it is now almost a requirement for upper-middle class membership. The upper educational class is in great demand for ceremonial occasions such as local institutes and state meetings required of the lower-lower and upper-upper educational classes."

"And on these occasions the upper class speeches change the behavior of these lower classes?"

"Of course not," said the student of American Educators indignantly. "Not even the upper-middle and lower-middle classes in charge of the meetings expect change to result. The upper class member is there to grace the meeting with upper class participation. I said these were ceremonial occasions!"

"Of course. And the other classes?"

"The upper-middle educational class," continued the enthusiastic anthropologist, "is populated largely by people high in the public school hierarchy. It also includes a few declassified university professors who have been revealed as upper-middles in upper's robes, and a handful of teachers from highly rated experimental schools. They are vigorous, energetic, and gregarious characters. They are also distinguishable by their many griefs about something they call 'the curriculum.' This curriculum (which, frankly, I don't quite understand) must be in a very bad way for they are constantly doing things to it. Indeed, the upper-middle class holds annual tribal gatherings in which they pray over this curriculum affair!"

"Do the two lower classes pray at these meetings too?"

"No," said the investigator. "One of the major educational class distinctions between the middle classes and the lower classes is in this matter of meeting. The lower classes do not attend such gatherings on the sea coast of New Jersey or in the metropolises or salubrious mountains. The few lower class members who do attend are definitely upward mobile. Incidentally, one important distinction between the upper-middle educational class and the lower-middle educational class is that the upper-middle has expenses paid to these tribal gatherings while lower-middle does not. Consequently, the lower-middle class is much more frequently encountered in state meetings."



"Degree of literacy also appears to be a distinction between the two middle classes. The upper-middle class contributes to magazines and yearbooks; the lower-middle class does not write for publication."

"You mentioned economic considerations. Is the upper class much more prosperous than the upper-middle educational class?"

The explorer of the folkways of the American Educators was genuinely shocked. "Indeed not! Surely, Herbert, you know that money isn't an infallible index to social position. The way one's culture regards one is important. Reputation! Many upper-middle Educators are more prosperous than many upper Educators. Upper-middles have been known to give up crass material advantages to join the uppers in university meccas. Similarly, when some uppers have shifted their class position to upper-middle, income was gained but face was lost."

"And the lower classes?" asked Herbert, watching the primitive masks through narrowed eyes. He had the illusion that they were winking at him.

"The upper-lower educational class is made up of garden variety Educators who are regarded as the backbone of the American Educator tribe. All of the class members above them admire and extol upper-lowers. However, none wishes to be one again. The upper-lowers attend workshops, take courses, try experiments, study child development, serve on committees, keep anecdotal records. They try to interpret what the three classes above them advocate. This is no easy task as you can plainly see. When an upper-lower achieves a fine interpretation, the upper-middles or an upward mobile lower-middle generously translates it back into the special tribal language at the tribal gatherings. Yes, upper-lowers are quite different from lower-lowers—" He shuddered.

"Yes?"

"On one thing all of the other educational classes are agreed. They deplore the attitudes and behavior of the lower-lower educational class. As a matter of fact, the uplift of the lower-lowers is the major work of the middle classes. The middle classes try to make upper-lowers out of lower-lowers. (Some 'superintendents' are among the lower-lowers. I am not yet certain what a 'superintendent' really is. It seems to be a kind of businessman.) Lower-lowers resist all new and educationally moral ideas. They simply put in their time. They have a peculiar unofficial slogan, 'Friday, thank God.' They



are not upward mobile. One informant refers to them as the Dead End Kids of American education. Apparently they have few middle class virtues."

"A remarkable culture!" said Herbert.

"Let me illustrate," said the indefatigable anthropologist. "Curriculum Director Joseph Doakes, who is lower-middle educational class, plans to attend a Denver convention of an organization mysteriously initialled ASCD, which is basically upper-middle with some upper and some lower-middle members. Now Doakes..."

On the paneled walls, the masks used in primitive ceremonials were smiling at each other.

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