

## GENERAL SEMANTICS AND THE DESEGREGATION CRISIS\*

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In January 1958, an unusual conference was held at Arden House in Harriman, New York, under the sponsorship of Freedom House of New York City. There, a group of 38 distinguished American citizens met for informal discussions to find a constructive solution to the dilemma of race relations that has developed in the South since the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of desegregation of public schools. They were men and women—educators, lawyers, authors, business men, political leaders, newspaper men, and other public-spirited citizens—of both 'races', from 10 states, both North and South. Through the discussions, it became clear that the problem that stands out in boldest relief is the *breakdown of communication*, not only between whites and Negroes in the South, but also among whites themselves and among Negroes themselves. The conference saw that the prime task in solving the racial dilemma is *building a bridge of communication* between people who must live and work together.

This is what we claim to be a special function of general semantics—*building a bridge of communication*. Korzybski hoped that some day general semantics would be recognized as a necessary help in governmental problems. Some of you remember how, in 1946 during the discussions leading to the merging of the War and Navy Departments into a single Department of Defense, the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs studied and used Korzybski's 'natural order of evaluation' in their consideration of the problem. In the present crisis of racial integration, surely Korzybski would have seen a problem that cries even more for the aid of his discipline.

In addition to the breakdown *within* the South, I have noticed still another in which we here in this conference may be more personally involved. That is a breakdown in communication between the people of the North and those of the South on the subject of desegregation. We know how powerful is the stereo-

type, which brings a signal reaction and makes us helpless, regardless of our intellectual knowledge to the contrary. But in focusing all our attention on the harm done by *racial* stereotypes in blocking understanding, we overlook the fact that there are also *sectional* stereotypes which can do equal harm. Since much of the pressure for desegregation comes from the North, the stereotype of the 'reactionary, prejudiced white Southerner' becomes a determining factor in the type of strategy used. In fact, it may be one of the major causes why the strategy employed so far has lacked the hoped-for success. When the side holding the offensive sets up a position that invites a response from the other extreme, it sets up a two-valued situation which can lead only to conflict, not to solution of problems. Leaders of integration who overlook the 'moderates' on the range in between make the process of adjustment more difficult. Our own John Kessler, who has done outstanding work in human relations in St. Louis, says that he deliberately suppressed undue publicity of any kind so as 'not to stimulate the hate boys.'

Let me tell you a little story of a Southerner who might have been termed a 'reactionary' if judged too soon by an either-or standard. He was my student in a Virginia college, a veteran, 26 years old, bred in generations of white Southern mores, and at the time I knew him a student of psychology, anthropology, and general semantics. But even he, with this rich intellectual background, was a slave to his mores. When Langston Hughes came to speak at an unsegregated intercollegiate meeting, the young man found himself in a condition of almost unbearable inner conflict over the question of whether or not to go. He was convinced intellectually; but his feelings revolted against a violation of his mores with as strong a resistance as his conscience would have revolted against a violation of his morals. In this dilemma, his feeling of guilt seemed equally great on either choice. But on the night of the meeting, I noticed him enter the hall accompanied by five young ladies. Later he told me:

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'I finally decided to dive in, so I took the girls to keep me from backing out. When I got to the meeting and saw black and white people sitting together, my hands broke into a heavy sweat and my knees almost melted under me. If I hadn't had the girls, I'm afraid I would have run out. But now a strange thing has happened. My old feelings of conflict are gone and I feel free!' Then he added, 'This is an experience that everybody should have!'

I tell this story to show how false and misleading is the *sectional* stereotype that ignores the many other factors motivating a man's behavior. The roots of this man's mores are so deep, so akin to conscience, that a violation of them may be as upsetting to his sense of values—to his whole being—as a violation of his moral convictions. He is moved to a new outlook—his thinking and values form a new gestalt—not by force, but by new experiences willingly accepted. It is my conviction that, at the point we have reached at present, those who make possible experiences of co-operation between members of the two 'races' in the South—such as working together on problems of common interest and meeting already-loved individuals like Marian Anderson and Ralph Bunche—people who do this are bringing about a change faster than the use of force can do. (For the sanest discussion of the theme 'not Negroes but Americans' I give you Hayakawa's address to the St. Louis Urban League published in *ETC.*, Spring 1953.)

In the findings of the Freedom House conference and in the recognition of sectional stereotypes lies our challenge. We say (as Wendell Johnson has so well explained) that general semantics offers a technique of problem solving. The Freedom House conference has spotlighted the task that lies ahead: *building a bridge of communication*. This must now be implemented. There is no other discipline so avowedly committed to the service of human communication as general semantics, and to fail to serve in this crisis would be to our lasting shame.

How? There is no simple answer. But is it beyond hope that some of *you* here today may be instrumental in bringing together anthropologists and psychologists and students of communication and

general semantics who will sit down together and begin to devise strategies to implement the vision of Freedom House? From my own recent discussion with the director of Freedom House, Mr. George Field, who organized the conference, I begin to see how I can take my first little steps. Others of you in more strategic positions can do more than I. We have the equipment; we need the leadership. As John Kessler says, now is the time to stop talking and get busy with the spade.

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