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People Profile: David Levinson

Editor

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societal forms has shown that as any type of human organization grows, it becomes more complex, with specialization and differentiation the key manifestations of that increasing complexity. Another manifestation of specialization that we are seeing today is the decline or nearly complete disappearance of "public intellectuals" — people like **Lewis Mumford** (*The City in History*) or **Erich Fromm** (*The Art of Loving*), who, free of disciplinary restrictions, asked the big questions and looked far and wide for the big answers.

One result of specialization and differentiation is that it becomes much more difficult to share knowledge across disciplines and to arrive at new synthesis of knowledge. In my own field of anthropology, the four-field approach that combined cultural and social anthropology, linguistics, biological anthropology, and archaeology in one department is quickly becoming a thing of the past. Linguists have gone off on their own; cultural anthropology is now split between the humanists and the scientists, and biological anthropology and archaeology have become ever more scientific and data-driven, rather like modern medicine — with some of the same negative consequences when it comes to broad understanding.

Why does this matter? What are the implications of this trend for the growth and spread of knowledge? The answer is simple: those seeking knowledge are not getting the full story. Certainly not from any single publication, and not even when they search across disciplines. How can they, when each discipline has become so narrow and focused? Our understanding of virtually any phenomena is less broad and less nuanced that it ought to be.

Solutions to the Problem

And solutions? Certainly modern technology and the new array of electronic information dissemination tools have made knowledge dissemination easier and quicker than ever. But one unintended consequence has been that now there is so much knowledge available that people are quickly overwhelmed and are lopped back into narrow approach.

Another solution is to embrace a multidisciplinary approach. That was the intention behind anthropology's four-field system, discussed above. Although that approach seems to have been largely abandoned, its benefits are still apparent to me. Last year, for example, when I visited a rural New England archaeological site dating to the mid-18th century for research on African-Americans today, the archaeology survey course I took more than 30 years ago helped me understand the site better than I would have otherwise, and cultural anthropology and history helped me place the site in its context. The unifying theme, in this case (and in anthropology generally), was the concept of culture. I believe the secret to successful cross-disciplinary work is identifying these unifying themes.

A third solution is to take a broad, global

against the grain people profile

Anthropologist and President, Berkshire Publishing Group
314 Main Street, Great Barrington, MA 01230
Phone: 413-528-0206 • <david@berkshirepublishing.com>
Blog: www.duboisweb.org/blog/

David Levinson

BORN & LIVED: Jersey City, NJ; Newark NJ, Elkins WV, Fort Bragg, NC, Williamsville, NY, Hamden/Branford, CT, Great Barrington MA.

EARLY LIFE: Born at an early age, grew up in Weequahic section of Newark NJ which at the time was a mainly Jewish enclave with one of the best public high schools in the nation and many students already preparing for medical and law school. Most famous alumni is **Philip Roth**. All changed after race riots in 1967 and white flight to the suburbs.

FAMILY: Father **Elias Levinson** (1919-), mother **Irma Gruenwald Levinson** (1920 – 2000), sister **Judith Levinson** (1950 -). Mother was a Holocaust survivor and my father, only child in his family who lived to adulthood, so we had a very small extended family.

EDUCATION: BA **Montclair State College** (psychology), MPA **New York University**, PhD **SUNY/Buffalo** anthropology.

FIRST JOB: Counting all the books in the **Newark Public Library** at age 16. Next summer I worked in a gas station.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Cultural anthropologist — research and writing on human issues such as homelessness, family relations, ethnic relations, substance abuse, religion and social methods and theory. Editor of several major encyclopedias, author of a dozen books. Editor/Publisher — helped launch electronic HRAF and other very early databases that are still being published and used; co-founded **Berkshire Publishing Group LLC**.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Home chores including carpentry, painting, wall papering, gardening, minor plumbing; watch football and baseball less often, read, shop for food, cook.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (**Freud**), *Souls of Black Folk* (**Du Bois**).

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Anxiety; sloppy thinking and work, limited insight.

PHILOSOPHY: Have a better attitude and superior state of mind.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Development of ten-volume *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* which became a model for reference publishing in the 1990s and also spawned a "world cultures" industry.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: See the sky each morning.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: A return to quality and integrative reference and other publishing. More effective use of online resources. 🌱



approach to an issue. A global approach is not synonymous with an interdisciplinary one, but they overlap in important ways. In both, one must work with alternative and sometimes contradictory concepts, a broad range of information, different methods, and different disciplines. At the **Berkshire Publishing Group**, global content is the focus of our publishing program, and yet we also know that none of our works — whether *World History*, *World Sport*, or the *Homelessness Handbook* — have been as fully global as we would like. To be truly global, a work must cover not only Europe and North America, but also non-Western regions, peoples, movements, and individuals; it must cover cross-cultural interactions, exchanges, migrations, and the diffusion of culture and

ideas; and it must involve authors from outside the United States and the English-speaking world. But going global has its own problems. At the top of the list are integrating concepts that are particular to a particular nation or region. For example, sports scholars in Europe talk about "sportification," a concept that has no equivalent in U.S. sports scholarship. Sportification seems to mean the transformation of sport in a society from folk sports to organized, globalized, and commercialized sports. This is the history of sport in many European nations, but not how the history of sport is conceived in the United States.

There have been formal, structured attempts to forge interdisciplinary work, primarily

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