

Houston Philosophical Society

633rd Annual Meeting

Cohen House

November 19, 2009

Under the leadership of President Evelyn Keyes, the Society gathered for a reception and dinner meeting. President Keyes reminded the group that in addition to an address the members would be asked to approve the amendment of the bylaws to replace the Audit Committee with a Long Range Planning Committee and to elect seven new members of the Society.

Following dinner the amendment was approved with no dissenting votes and seven new members were elected by secret ballot with no dissenting votes. New members are Mr. Kelly Frels (C), Mr. Anthony Freud (E), Dr. Mark Jones (D), Dr. Diane Lovell (D), Dr. Wayne Shandera (B), Mr. Craig Smyser (C), and Dr. Rick Wilson (D).

Don Byrnes then facilitated the introduction of guests at each table.

President Keyes called the attention of the Society to the recent death of two members of the group. Professors Patten and Klineberg spoke in memory of Dr. June Holley and Margaret Skidmore.

In the absence of Vice President Ward, President Keyes introduced the speaker of the evening. Professor Stephen L. Klineberg is trained as a social psychologist and joined the Rice faculty in 1972 after studying at Haverford College, the University of Paris, and Princeton. He is the co-director of the Institute for Urban Research and participated in the annual Houston Area Surveys from 1982 to the present.

Professor Klineberg's topic was "The Changing Face of Houston: Tracking the Economic and Demographic Transformations through 28 Years of Houston Surveys." The survey of scientifically selected representatives of Harris County residents receives broad support from local foundations, corporations, and individuals.

The first survey was completed just prior to the sudden collapse in 1982 of the 80-year oil boom in Houston. Recovery from the deep and prolonged recession of the mid 1980s was in the midst of a restructured economy and a demographic revolution. These same transformations have refashioned American society itself.

Line graphs were used to trace numerous questions including percentage with positive ratings of job opportunities in the Houston area, negative ratings of job opportunities in relation to the official unemployment rates, and the question of "What is the biggest problem in the Houston area today?" This last question focused on three possible answers: crime, economy, and traffic.

Klineberg cited the replacement of the “resource economy” of the industrial era (with Houston’s favorable position) with a new high-tech, knowledge-based, fully worldwide marketplace. The once traditional “blue collar path” to financial security has largely disappeared and almost all of the good paying jobs now require high levels of technical skills and educational credentials. One characteristic is the pressure for more education. Klineberg indicated that “What you earn depends of what you’ve learned.”

From 1949 to 1979 there was a range of percentage increase more or less evenly balanced across the spectrum ranging from 86% to 116% but since that time (The Millennial qQuarter Century) the bottom four quintiles report show an increase of from 4% to 22% while the top quintile increased by 46% and the top 5% increased by 68%.

In this new environment a new importance is accorded to “Quality-of-place” considerations. Houston’s prospects increasingly depend on the city’s ability to attract and maintain the nation’s most skilled and creative “knowledge workers” and high tech companies. This means that: significant improvements are required in the region’s mobility and transformation systems; the revitalization and preservation of its urban centers; the excellence of venues for sports, arts, and culture; the enhancement of its green spaces, trees and bayous; the richness of its hiking, boating, and birding areas; the healthfulness of its air and water quality; and its overall physical attractiveness and aesthetic appeal. Across the years of the survey the public’s support for new initiatives along these lines has remained form or grown stronger.

A line graph on this point indicated the strong percentages saying that a much improved mass transit system must be developed and that it must include a rail component.

Over the years U.S. immigration policy has varied from open to all who would come, then the restrictive National Origins Quota Act of 1924 which dramatically reduced immigration and restricted newcomers to the “Nordics” of Western Europe. Then, in 1965, the “Hart-Celler Act” for the first time accepted large numbers of non-Europeans with three bases for preference: family reunification, professional skills, or refugee status. The result of Hart-Celler was a dramatic increase in the number of documented U.S. immigrants. In the 1950s there were some 2.6 million immigrants which grew by the 1990s to over 8 million. The modern nadir of immigration was in the 1930s when only 628,000 were admitted.

The consequence of this influx has been a demographic revolution in which Houston, along with Los Angeles and New York City among others, has been at the forefront of the new diversity that is refashioning the socio-political landscape of urban America.

Throughout its history Houston was essentially a bi-racial Southern city, dominated and controlled, in the normal mode, by white men. Today Houston is one of the most culturally diverse metropolitan areas in the country, and all of its ethnic communities are now “minorities.” In 1960 Houston was nearly 73% Anglo, the estimated distribution in 2008 was 36% Anglo, 18% Black, 39% Hispanic, and 7% Asian/Other.

There have been remarkable interactions of ethnicity and age in the United States. The other demographic revolution consists of the remarkable “aging,” or “graying,” of the American population. Today’s seniors are primarily Anglos, as are the 76 million Americans born between 1946 and 1965. In the next 30 years, the numbers over age 65 will double. The younger cohorts, who will replace the “Baby Boomers,” are disproportionately non-Anglo and far less privileged. The “aging of America” is not only a division by generation but also by socioeconomic status and ethnic background. Nowhere is this ongoing transformation more clearly seen than in the age distributions of the Harris County population.

Among respondents aged 18 to 29, 48% were Hispanics, and 24% each Anglo and Black. Among respondents older than 45, a majority were Anglo. In the 30 to 44 group, Anglos were a plurality. Given the concern about an educated workforce, a graph was included that showed levels of educational attainment. Among Asians, Anglos, and Blacks from 5 to 11% did not complete high school. 16% of U.S. born Latinos failed to complete high school and 48% of immigrant Latinos also failed to complete. 36% of Asians and 29% of Anglos completed college, 17% of Blacks, 14% of U.S. born Latinos, and 8% of immigrant Latinos completed college. Graphs also tracked socio-economic status and indications of assimilation among Latino immigrants.

Over the years since 1994, strong majorities have agreed that diversity is a good thing and that it will become a great strength of the Houston area. But, there are real differences of opinion among the Anglos, Blacks, and Latinos regarding rating the relationships among them as well as beliefs about discrimination in its various forms.

Klineberg concluded his remarks with conclusion regarding the formidable challenges Houston and America face. Both city and nation will need to nurture a far more educated workforce, and fashion policies that can reduce the growing inequalities and prevent the rise of a new urban underclass. To attract the most innovative companies and talented individuals, Houston will need to grow into a more environmentally appealing urban destination, and develop the research centers that will fuel the critical drivers of the new economy. If the region is to flourish in the 21st century, it will need to develop into a much more unified and inclusive multiethnic society, one in which equality of opportunity is truly made available to all citizens and all of its communities are invited to participate as full partners in shaping the Houston future.

Thanks to Professor Klineberg for his remarks and for the electronic copy of the PowerPoint of the presentation which is attached.

Don R. Byrnes