

A Letter of Recommendation

James Sebring

The following is a copy of a letter of recommendation that I was asked to write for Gerry when he was up for promotion to the final fullness of professorship. It expresses all that I felt then and continue to feel and believe about Gerry. The letter comments upon him as a teacher, scholar, individual, and fieldworker. It was not only a letter of recommendation, but my tribute to him.

November 8, 1972

Professor William A. Shack
Department of Anthropology
University of California 94720

Dear Professor Shack:

I am pleased indeed at your request to write a letter of recommendation for Professor Gerald D. Berreman. In most of what I say I will assume a knowledge on your part of the superficial manifestations of Professor Berreman's professional activities and accomplishments—his many publications; the papers he has read at local, national, and international scientific conferences and meetings; his scientific honors (e.g., Guggenheim Fellowship); the professional offices he has held (e.g., his current position in the American Anthropological Association); etc. In this letter I will give my assessment of the quality of his activities and accomplishments and say something about his personal character.

The geographic area of the world in which, as an anthropologist, I specialize, is India. I feel I can therefore state emphatically that no scholar, past or present, of any discipline, has as great a first-hand and as various a knowledge of India, or has transmitted more of this knowledge in the form of scholarly publications as well as public lectures and papers read at professional meetings, as Professor Berreman. The amount of published material which resulted from his first field research trip to India is without past or present equal among Indianists. He was scarcely back in the U.S. from his most recent research trip to India when he had written a paper based upon this research and had it accepted for publication in the main journal of American anthropology (c.f. the June 1972 issue of the *American Anthropologist*); and he had already read an earlier version of this paper at an international conference at Burg-Wartenstein. An aspect of the quality of his published works is their thoroughness and completeness. It is indisputable fact that no ethnography of a village in India is so

utterly complete, so detailed, and so in-depth a description as his *Hindus of the Himalayas*. Only a few other single-volume ethnographies on any peoples of the world, not simply India, duplicate the thoroughness of *Hindus of the Himalayas*.

Impressive in their sheer quantity, Professor Berreman's published works are no less remarkable for their uniformly high quality. An indication of their quality, independent of any assertion of mine to this effect, are the journals in which they have been published: *American Anthropologist*, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, *Ethnology*, *Current Anthropology*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Human Organization*, *Journal of Asian Studies*—all the top journals, not obscure journals with limited, specialized circulation and questionable editorial standards. None of these leading journals (with the possible exception of the *Journal of Asian Studies*) accepts for publication papers which make no general point, which do not place empirical data in some larger conceptual-theoretical framework. Even those papers of Professor Berreman which deal with relatively unique or relatively obscure aspects of human society and are at a low level of descriptive generalization have some general point to make. Because his published works have some general points to make, they are more accessible and of interest to a wider range of scholars and laymen. The accessibility and wide appeal of his work derive also from his acute perception of the occurrence of cross-culturally common patterns of behavior and social and cultural institutions. His widely reprinted and quoted "Caste in India and the U.S." was merely a preliminary statement on caste as a form of social organization exhibiting common features in widely diverse cultures. His later, more extended essays on caste stand as contemporary classics in the social scientific literature. I cannot conceive that they will be superceded, except in minor detail, by any other general cross-cultural treatment of the subject.

You request that I make some assessment of Professor Berreman's "international reputation and impact on world scholarship in the discipline." I do not think there is any anthropologist of any country better known and respected (and personally liked) by both the older and younger generations of social scientists in India than Professor Berreman. Indeed, many of the younger ones regard him as virtually a *guru*, despite Berreman's own comparative youthfulness. In England his reputation as an Indianist (or South Asianist) equals that of F.G. Bailey and in the Scandanavian countries that of Fredrik Barth. He is well known and widely respected in anthropological circles in France because of his fundamental disagreement with the approach to an understanding and analysis of Indian society espoused by Louis Dumont. (Even here, where fundamental disagreement exists, there is mutual respect.) Because of his general essay on caste published in DeVos and Wagatsuma's *Japan's Invisible Race*, he has even gained recognition in Japan, which is fairly unusual for an American anthropologist whose primary geographic area of interest is India. Because of his frequent participation in international conferences, his reputation must be even more widespread than I am aware. There are not many anthropologists of Berreman's age and generation whose reputation is as international

Gerry Berreman, who have attempted, by word and deed, to convey the extent of their moral concern and awareness and who have made lasting friends in these countries.

Sincerely yours,

James M. Sebring
Assistant Professor