

ESSAY REVIEW

RESEARCH WITHOUT PROGRESS

THIS VOLUME BEARS evidence of a very active editor's role on the part of Donald Baker, who was Senior Research Fellow at the University of Rhodesia's Centre for Inter-Racial Studies.¹ At one level, this is entirely welcome, for his honourable attempt to create a roughly common format for the individual contributions both provides a much more useful basis for meaningful comparisons than similar collections and also gives the book a cohesion often lacking in enterprises involving several scholars from different academic disciplines. Seeking to rescue the study of race relations from what Pierre van den Berghe called a 'theoretical no-man's land', Baker has consciously focused on six geographic areas where the superordinate racial group came primarily from the same metropolitan state and, within these six countries (United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia), he has largely persuaded his colleagues to examine the political relationships between the racial groups in terms of each group's resources, broadly defined, and each group's propensity to mobilize its resources. An Introduction establishes this framework, with greater linguistic complexity than the simple truths require, and a Conclusion draws the threads together, again concentrating somewhat laboriously on groups' differential access to, and propensity to use, significant resources. Sandwiched between Bakers' multi-annotated general contribution are ten case studies, of which Adam's chapter on South Africa and Murphree's on Rhodesia are obviously of prime interest to readers of *Zambezia*. There are no startling interpretive insights to be found, but the contributions are scholarly, somewhat pedestrian as they follow Baker's integrating framework, and conceivably of value to those with very limited knowledge of Southern Africa. It is doubtful, however, whether this volume has rescued the study of race relations from the theoretical no-man's land, although it does provide in part a framework within which race relations — or any other group relations for the matter — might be usefully studied.

This long introductory paragraph would normally suffice as a review of this book, but I think it is worth examining more closely some of its defects, for it is profoundly unsatisfactory in a number of fundamental ways. At one level, I noted initially, Baker's editorship is refreshingly successful; at others, however, it seems to me to have been unfortunate, since the general principles around which the essays have been constructed appear to me to be misguided. One of the difficulties in formulating my disquiet precisely is reminiscent of Herbert Wehner's problems in the West German Election of 1965

¹D.G. Baker (ed.) *Politics of Race* (Farnborough, D.C. Heath, 1975), 312 pp., no price indicated.

when he was asked by a supporter why he had not cut Chancellor Erhard down to size: 'It is hard', he said, 'to nail a blancmange to the wall'. To illustrate what I mean, let us start right at the beginning with the very first sentence of Baker's Introduction: 'Race, as ethnicity and culture, is a fundamental factor of politics'. First of all, its meaning is dangerously unclear; is race being *defined* as ethnicity and culture or merely being compared with ethnicity and culture as three separate fundamental factors of politics, the first alternative ignoring the relevant literature, the second being logically odd? Apart from that initial concern its main assertion is so unexceptionable that it hardly requires annotation, let alone to the three sources in fact cited. One of the characteristics of Baker's writing, and Adam's and Murphree's to a lesser extent, is precisely a similar profusion of statements that are so obvious as to be virtually truisms together with copious footnoting — the material of a decent third-year student married to the referential apparatus of an established scholar.

The blancmange quality of much of the book shows especially in areas where a book of this title really ought to be substantially stiffer. Two theoretical issues come immediately to mind. To start with, there is virtually no allusion to, or discussion of, the current debate on the respective significance of race and class as explanatory forces or 'fundamental factors of politics'. It may be objected that the book's focus is intentionally limited to the role of race and therefore does not need to address itself to the role of other factors. But this is not a satisfactory riposte at all, since any appreciation of the role of race necessitates some discussion of its relative importance *vis-à-vis* other potentially important factors, especially when one of the major current academic debates is centred precisely on this issue. In this context, one must really ask under what conditions, if any, the saliency of race is overborne by other factors. The second glaring omission is any sophisticated consideration of the nature of power. The first question to which contributors were asked to address themselves was this: 'What role has power played as a determinant of race relations, historically and more recently?' But the definition of power, such as it is, transforms the question into a single request for an explanation of the outcome of political conflict between races. The Marxist implications in the notion of determinism are not explored; the sorts of power to which Bachrach and Lukes, for example, draw attention are again glossed over. For the most part, it is the overt face of power which predominates in these essays, the physical, technical and legal resources available to racial groups, but the introduction of the idea of 'propensity to mobilize' surely requires consideration of what may be termed the indirect face of power, the norms and values which can delineate what is possible by distorting 'reality' through the imposed dominance of one vision of power relations to the exclusion of others. Baker's *framework*, then, holds the possibility of incisive analysis with its call to explore the factors affecting the propensity to mobilize objective resources, but this challenge is not taken up. Relations between the races tend, therefore, to decline into rather crude historical examples of very simple power relations.

The lack of conceptual precision seems to affect also the use of 'race', whose very status in this book remains unclear to me. It has been said with much truth that almost any classification is better than none, but the nature and purpose of the classification, if it is to be useful, must be crystal clear. At some stages race is defined wholly in terms of pigmentation, but when quite properly French practices are differentiated *en passant* from British

colonial practices, race *per se* clearly ceases to be envisaged as the fundamental factor. Differentiation within races is alluded to but normally spirited away again, partly, I suspect, because the conceptual framework requires that the classification 'race' should be simplex. This seems a problematic assumption. Baker writes in his cautious and heavy way: 'In societies that are multiracial, the racial factor, whether initially or subsequently, either openly or more indirectly, almost invariably emerges as a major determinant of intergroup relations' (p.2). I have already referred to the unfortunate gloss over the openly/indirectly dichotomy and would here point to the dominance of group as the unit of analysis.

Conceptually, it need hardly be said, groups can be classified in many ways other than that of pigmentation. Baker appears hardly aware of this. I have already mentioned the lack of class analysis and in the cocoon of my Anglo-centric subjectivity I may be forgiven for suggesting that Americans are peculiarly insensitive to notions of class. The Marxist definition is alien to the mainstream of American intellectual traditions and, despite Murphree's spasmodic references to Arrighi, remains alien to this volume, while the British variant (perhaps best encapsulated in the French term 'snobisme') is wholly absent. Rhodesian politics cannot be comprehended, it seems to me, unless there is a genuine familiarity with the nuances of social stratification *within* the British middle-classes. L. Bowman's book on Rhodesia had the same failing² and he, like Baker is an American (as is Murphree partly by training). Baker seems to be unaware of the intra-class nuances of British society; furthermore, he even refers to the Anglo-fragment repeatedly as English, as though the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh, great sources of immigrants, were minor sub-categories of the English! The lack of differentiation within racial groups struck me repeatedly; nowhere was this more evident than in the cursory treatment of Black group behaviour in Southern Africa, but it was also evidenced in the oversimple picture of homogeneity among the Whites as well.

Even if we allow that race, as used here, tends to refer to the predominant group within the pigmentationally exclusive group, we are still faced with the problem of deciding the significance of such classification. Put crudely, and ignoring the extremely thorny problem of the timing of particular political demands for racially discriminatory legislation, it is not at all clear whether genetic attributes cause patterns of behaviour or whether racial identity is used by politicians for their own purposes. The first alternative is not considered and, as far as the second alternative is concerned, there is no discussion of who explicitly uses 'race'. The vast literature on ethnicity in Africa might productively have been called into play, especially as pigmentation is conceived here, as tribe often is elsewhere, primarily as a classificatory term designed to exaggerate differences between people living within a single nation state. Yet this does not answer the more fundamental question of whether the racial classification predominates because of populist pressures from below or because of an elite's calculation as to its own political advantage. Nor, indeed, does it leave much room for the insights to be derived from the individual-centred psychologists like McEwan.

These general comments scarcely scratch at the range of questions which

²L.W. Bowman, *Politics in Rhodesia: White Power in an African State* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1973).

seem unanswered. What we have in this volume — and I am thinking in particular of the general chapters and the southern African contributions — are obvious observations dressed up as behavioural discoveries in often tortuously structured language. This is not to say that the individual contributors are wrong (the most obvious are usually the most important points) so much as incomplete, conceptually and empirically. Since much of the argument appears in *ex post facto* rationalizations lacking detailed discussion of the precise processes and forms through which demands are articulated and introduced into the political process, the end result is somewhat anaemic and certainly left enough doubts in my mind to wonder whether the omissions were so important that the picture painted here was almost sufficiently distorted as actually to qualify as false.

There is, of course, at first sight a dilemma between the need to provide digestible comparative material and the scholar's duty to comment on material incisively. But it is a dilemma akin to that facing a distinguished contractor or architect on a desert island; he can try and build a beautiful modern home, but the material and technology are simply not there. In other words, Baker's objective, which sounds so appealing and important, is an impracticability. A slim volume simply cannot both encompass the rich variety of analytical insights into the role of race and the form of power and also include at the same time the raw material necessary to illustrate them in action. By attempting both tasks, this volume fails in both. It neither provides the theoretical underpinning of a thorough analysis of race in politics nor the empirical material by which the theories could be tested. The level of analysis seems too low and the descriptive chapters too often a series of assertions rather than arguments. Given the enormous growth in published literature, academic publishers have a greater responsibility than before to ensure that new books genuinely add to our knowledge or our understanding of the world. I read and then reread on several occasions the chapters by Baker, Adam, and Murphree (which accounts in part for the delay in reviewing the book), but I must confess that I become more and more convinced that behind the words and the citations virtually nothing was added to the existing stock of knowledge and, even as summaries, they seemed dangerously incomplete. I fear that it may become a widely used book for courses in 'race relations', for which it has impeccable overt credentials, and D. C. Heath's decision to publish will be financially justified. But the students will miss the excitement of current intellectual debate and, more important, the detailed evidence to comprehend the fascinating complexity of political relations in multiracial states; the 'sensible' simplifications presented here may suggest that discriminatory systems can be simply understood, but that would lead to a misunderstanding of the real complexities. Finishing on a more constructive, and exclusively Rhodesian, note, we still need a critique and updating of Arrighi's 1966 analysis with its challenge to the centrality of race in Rhodesian politics, particularly in the present turbulent times. Now, *there* is a real subject.

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