REVIEW ARTICLE

THEORETIC HISTORY BY OSMOSIS: THE LANGUAGE OF COMMON SENSE AND THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF 'RACE RELATIONS' IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

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If further proof is needed that history uninformed by adequate theory is bad history,¹ or that structural-functionalist social science is tarted-up common sense,² K.R. Howe's *Race relations Australia and New Zealand** unwittingly provides it. In a recent article which contended that race and ethnicity can best be understood from the point of view of Weberian stratification theory, R.A. Wild omitted a critique of the structural-functionalist model which informs most of the Australasian literature on race and ethnic relations on the grounds that the model had been criticized to death in a debate which began in the 1940s.³ Those who are familiar with the debate will appreciate the truth of this assertion. Howe is not only unfamiliar with the debate, he has not even read in the relevant structural-functionalist literature or begun to think at all critically about his basic assumptions. And yet the theoretical model he implicitly employs is profoundly structural-functionalist – without any of its few redeeming features.

Structural-functionalist theory defines the problem of racial and ethnic inequality in Western industrial societies as one of lower-class status and perceives the solution of the problem in terms of the 'inclusion' ('integration', 'assimilation') of the whole of the lower class, including racial and ethnic groups, in the mainstream of a consensually based social structure.⁴ Oblivious of this, but his mind steeped in the phraseology of the theory by an education in New Zealand, Howe took a tour of Australia in 1970 and decided that 'race relations' in New Zealand were 'better' than in Australia. The chief grounds for this decision were that the living conditions of Aborigines were worse than those of Maoris and that Aborigines were the victims of more intensely racist attitudes and treatment, public and private; Maoris, in short, had been far more 'included' in the 'mainstream'. He thereupon set out to ascertain the reasons for this difference and arrived at the unstartling conclusion, given basic similarities in the processes of European colonization in the two countries, that the cause is probably to be sought chiefly in differences in the nature of Maori and Aboriginal societies in pre-European times. These differences brought differing reactions to European settlement, and both sets of differences resulted in European attitudes towards, and treatment of, Aborigines being far more brutal and racist than they have been in respect of Maoris. Differing attitudes and treatment, and a continuing less 'effective' response on the part of Aborigines, produced inclusionist government policies for Maoris and, until recently, exclusionist ones for Aborigines.

It would all sound plausible enough to anyone who failed to question its underlying assumptions. Indicative of Howe's uncritical attitude to these is the fact

* Subtitled *A comparative survey 1770's-1970's*. Methuen, Wellington, Sydney, London, 1977. Pp. viii + 95. \$4.95.

¹ See also, for example, Stedman Jones 1972 and 1976.

² See also, for example, Hartwig 1978: 124-126 and references supplied.

³ 1977: 101.

⁴ See, for example, Lockwood.

that he does not even pause to consider the much-debated question concerning what constitutes a system of 'race relations'. He simply makes the narrow assumption that the concept of 'race relations' is exhausted by Aboriginal-white relations in respect of Australia, and by Maori-white relations in respect of New Zealand, and writes as if the interaction of two peoples who look different and have different cultures in itself constitutes a 'race relations' situation. He employs the concept, in short, in its loose, popular sense. This is in keeping with his unapologetic, and apparently unthinking, use of the terms 'half-caste', 'mixed-blood' and 'full-blood'.

'Aborigines', 'Maoris' and 'Europeans' are accordingly treated as undifferentiated, homogeneous 'races'. The whole question of class and other divisions and relations within and across these groups is virtually ignored; there is no attempt to locate race and ethnic relations within a broad theory of social stratification alongside other dimensions of social inequality. The central question — why are Maoris more 'included' in the 'mainstream' — is thus wrongly posed from the outset. We are not even told what 'inclusion' in the 'mainstream' of a stratified society would look like. In terms of the functionalist model, it would mean simply that Aborigines and Maoris were evenly distributed throughout the social structure. But since the model accepts the inevitability and functionality of stratification, and since capitalist economies indeed generate structural inequality, what this would entail is that, for every Aboriginal or Maori who went up, some other person (who would certainly belong to a 'race' on Howe's loose usage) would go down. Equality of opportunity would thus in reality become equality of opportunity to become unequal for individuals of differing racial descent. But Howe is innocent of such considerations. In writing of the possibility of Aborigines and in particular of Maoris achieving equality with Europeans (his last two chapters but one are entitled, respectively, 'Towards equality: Aboriginal society, 1950s-1970s' and 'Towards equality: Maori society, 1950s-1970s'), he presupposes that Europeans themselves are undifferentiated according to class or race. This is an insult to the working class, to the unemployed, and to recent immigrants, among others; it is no doubt highly gratifying to the Australian and New Zealand ruling classes.

But above all, of course, it is an insult to Aborigines and Maoris themselves. For as Howe knows well, on every meaningful socio-economic index both Aborigines and Maoris are at the bottom of the pile, or near it; and while their living conditions have improved during this century, their relative position in the socio-economic structures has not. In respect of Aborigines, he explains this for the most part in terms of the central thesis set out above (the generation of attitudes and policies which excluded Aborigines from the 'mainstream'), but when he comes to the period after World War II, during which policy has been directed towards 'inclusion' and there has been an ideological commitment to formal equality, he finds it necessary to introduce a social pathology model so dear to the hearts of structural-functionalists — the famous 'vicious circle of poverty': 'Present Aboriginal living conditions throughout the country help ensure that the "Aboriginal syndrome" is a self-perpetuating one. Poverty and poor health contribute to poor educational achievement, unemployment, and hence poverty' (p. 64). Such 'blaming the victim' might appear inconsistent with his central thesis, but was always implicit in his emphasis on the 'inadequacy' of the Aboriginal response, an emphasis which now stands revealed in its true light: Aborigines have not been the victims of an inherently unjust socio-economic order but of their own lifestyles.

In respect of Maoris, Howe is not even sure what he has to explain: writing of the period '1950s-1970s', he asserts that 'the welfare state. . . had not [by 1960] closed the ever widening gap between Maori and European standards of living' (p. 79), only to claim a few pages later that 'Maoris have equal civil rights which they are increasingly able to turn to equal opportunities' and to predict that 'the bulk of the Maori population will continue to be included socially, economically and

REVIEW ARTICLE

physically into white society'.⁵ Since he is sure, however, that Maori living conditions are superior relative to those of *Aborigines*, he introduces, not a 'vicious circle', but J.K. Hunn's 'magic circle' ('now universally recognized'): "Better education promotes better employment, which promotes better housing, which promotes better health and social standing, which promotes better education and thus closes the circle" (p. 79).

Had he paused to reflect that the social function of education in Australia and New Zealand (and other capitalist societies) has always been to reproduce and legitimate class inequality,⁶ he might have avoided positing such embarrassingly contradictory 'circles'. Of course, the 'magic circle' *could* significantly alter the relative position of Maoris (and of *Aborigines*) if there were massive positive discrimination in their favour for a lengthy period. But there never will be such discrimination, only sops here and there, so long as the present power structure remains intact, for that would involve the class with power signing away its privileges. But Howe is quite incapable of seeing this because he systematically begs the question of the structural generation of inequality and has no adequate theory of power or of the state. The model he implicitly employs is a simplistic, pluralist one which locates power 'within the parliamentary system' (p. 42) (where it is wielded by politicians responding to public attitudes) and which fails to incorporate any notion of ideology. Middle class values are simply assumed to constitute the consensual value system — 'the predominant mores of the white community' (p. 83) — on which the social order rests and into which Maoris and *Aborigines* are being willy-nilly 'included'. There is no examination of this value system in relation to the power of the hegemonic class and its ability to mobilize bias and manufacture consensus. Everybody's 'attitude', provided it is white, is presumed, in effect, to be as influential as that of everybody else — a shepherd's as influential as a squatter's, and so on.

There is nevertheless no gainsaying the fact that, given basic similarities in the structural generation of inequality in Australia and New Zealand, the answer to the question why most Maoris are relatively better off than most *Aborigines* in terms of living standards and of status in the wider society must be sought chiefly in 'the relative strength and resilience of Maori society' (p. 1). At least two further comments are in order, however. First, Howe is unable from his perspective to pose the question concerning the reasons for such relative strength at all adequately. In Chapter 1 he ranks Maori above Aboriginal society in terms of 'cultural evolution' and suggests that Maori society had more in common with European than Aboriginal; in Chapter 2 he condemns nineteenth century social evolutionists for holding similar views. No doubt he does so because nineteenth century social evolutionists were often *also* racists and rarely pointed out, as Howe himself is careful to do in Chapter 1, that a concept of social evolution does not necessarily entail a notion of the inherent inferiority or superiority of the bearers of cultures. But this is no argument that their views on social evolution were wrong, especially since they are essentially Howe's own. As if to compound confusion, he dubs 'their' view 'cultural relativity', meaning that Aboriginal and Maori cultures were deemed less advanced relative to European culture, and Aboriginal culture relative to them both, which is precisely the reverse of the accepted sense of the concept, that no value judgments can properly be made between cultures. The wondrous upshot of such confusion is that, like many of the nineteenth century evolutionists he

⁵ P. 83. Figures are cited on p. 59 to demonstrate that 'the gap had been considerably narrowed' between ca.1935-1950. Crucial indicators like ownership of wealth are ignored however.

⁶ See especially Bowles and Gintis, Gramsci, Sharp.

condemns, he takes social evolution for granted and asks, in effect, not why Maori society had, but why Aboriginal society had not, developed from 'parasitical'⁷ [sic] hunter-gathering etc. To anyone who appreciates the enormous power of ideology in classless society in the absence of any major social contradiction, and the full significance of the fact that the greater part of human history has been dominated by a primitive communist mode of production, the former question, adequately phrased, is by far the more significant: how and why were Maoris and their eastern Polynesian forebears in process of developing from primitive communism to what some contemporary European observers well understood was a society in transition to class society?⁸ Instead of confronting this question, Howe concentrates on the other and trots out a fantastic cliché concerning the harshness and aridity of the Australian environment (is North Queensland so different from Papua New Guinea or Australia Felix from New Zealand?), together with various tautological explanations concerning the relative antiquity of Aboriginal and Maori settlement, the greater number of Aboriginal languages, and so on.⁹ I do not know whether sufficient empirical data exists to explain adequately why Maori society was in transition, but theory and comparative data suggest an answer in terms of the production of a regular surplus product and the development of the social division of labour;¹⁰ and answers will never be correct, no matter what the abundance of empirical data, if questions are not.

Secondly, what strikes an observer with a more adequate theoretical perspective, and Maoris and Aborigines themselves who compare their lot, is not the differences in the histories of 'race relations' in Australia and New Zealand, but their similarity. Howe is aware of similarities, but refers to them as 'apparent' and as 'at best true only in the most general sense, at worst. . .misleading' in view of 'major differences' (p. 73). But why are similarities in the most general sense not the most important ones, why are they not more important than differences, and why would an emphasis on them necessarily obscure differences? Aborigines and Maoris who intelligently compare their histories since the advent of Europeans, are likely to be fully cognizant of the fact, if Howe is not, that capitalism is an expansionist system which invaded and largely destroyed their societies and deprived them of most of their land; that both societies resisted this process as best they could; that apart from the period of resistance both have always desired 'a decent union of their lives with ours but on terms that let them preserve their own identity';¹¹ that both produced incipient peasantries only to see them ruthlessly underdeveloped;¹² that, whatever the differences between 'amalgamationist' and 'protectionist' strategies, the

⁷ P. 3. The rider 'in a non-pejorative sense' is added. But what is that sense, since a parasite damages its host? What Howe means to imply, of course, is that Aborigines merely 'took from' nature and in no way improved its productivity. This, however, is false. See especially Hallam 1975.

⁸ See p. 17. Anyone still intimidated by the assault on the idea of social development in the bourgeois social sciences once that idea came to be associated with Marxism should consult, for example, Makarius 1974, 1977; Gellner, Cohen.

⁹ He does glimpse the power of Aboriginal ideology (pp. 7-8) — though the concept is foreign to him — but not sufficiently to avoid these absurdities.

¹⁰ On primitive communism and the transition to class society see Marx, Marx and Engels, Pershitz, Andreyev, Bloch, Godelier, Meillasoux, Sahlins, Terray, Thompson, Hindess and Hirst, Gellner (especially comments by Pershitz).

¹¹ Stanner 1969:28. Stanner here generalizes about Aborigines, but his words are equally apposite to Maoris.

¹² Regarding Maoris, see Hargreaves 1959, 1960, Sorrenson, Ward; regarding Aborigines, see Markus 1977:277-8 (and the works by Barwick, Massola, Mulvaney, Horner there cited), Jenkin.

REVIEW ARTICLE

ultimate aim of the state for long periods in both countries was the disappearance of Aboriginal and Maori societies as distinguishable entities; that both societies have been the victims of an overwhelmingly similar racist ideology; and that both have little chance of bridging the 'gap' short of a thorough-going transformation of the whole structure of social inequality. They are entitled to be told why.

Howe at least does not repeat the sillier conclusions of other writers in the same tradition concerning the overriding importance of the humanitarian influence in New Zealand or of the brutality of convicts in Australia.¹³ But his book is subliminally tarted up bourgeois ideology for all that. It does a particular disservice to Maoris, other ethnic groups, and the working class¹⁴ in New Zealand in that it does nothing to challenge the ruling ideology on the issue of 'harmonious race relations', and much to reinforce it. Aborigines for their part are likely to find it a handy compendium of misconceptions concerning their society and history. 'Any conclusions should... be taken as suggestions for further study', Howe warns in a preface. They should rather be regarded as the rag-ends of an intellectually bankrupt tradition in history and the social sciences.

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

¹³ For example Geddes, Sinclair.

¹⁴ Compare how the issue of class inequality is mystified for, e.g., the Brazilian working class, peasantry and lumpen proletariat by continual indoctrination to the effect that they enjoy 'harmonious race relations' which present no barriers to social mobility. See, for example, Degler, Ianni.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The moving frontier: aspects of Aboriginal-European interaction in Australia.
 Edited by Peter Stanbury. A.H. and A.W. Reed, Sydney, 1976. Pp. 160. \$12.95.

The concept behind this book was a wise one. There is a need for authoritative popular accounts of the diversity of Aboriginal culture and its interface with European expansion. Thirteen authors have presented individual essays on aspects including prehistory, environment, traditional economic and social life, cultural factors such as art, music and language, historical and contemporary race relations and the European perception of Aboriginal Australians through the medium of art and literature. The book is clearly printed and attractively assembled on good quality paper. There are contributions from established authorities such as Dr A. Capell and Dr Alice Moyle, but several authors are relatively new to the field. The editor is to be commended for encouraging so many 'nonestablishment' scholars. He also enlisted support from 'outside' disciplines, and Leonie Kramer's short survey of 'the Aboriginal in literature' opens up a neglected area. The volume is innovative in one most positive direction. Terry Widders was asked to contribute thoughts on the predicament of his own people. His insights merit attention and it is to be hoped that he will proceed to a more extended treatment.

The credit balance of this book is unfortunately offset by so many negative features, that it is necessary to emphasise them at some length. The editor must be held responsible for many of them. Uneven and repetitive chapters are included, several of them bearing the hallmarks of hurried preparation. In some chapters factual content is sparse, while other sections are overloaded with personal names or disjointed and bald factual details. There is some blurring between fact and inference. The expectation of audience level evidently varied from elementary school to undergraduate. The editor fails to explain why he exerted such lax editorial control or why he excluded any documentation of illustrations or bibliographic advice. The principles that guided his choice of authors, chapters, themes or illustrations also remain unstated. The dustjacket blurb implies some