

# Book Reviews

Science, Racism and Social Darwinism: A Review of *Race* by JOHN R. BAKER (London, Oxford University Press, 1974). xx + 625 pp. £6.50.

*'Everyone thinks me a cannibal  
But you know how people talk.'*

— O. Yambo

John Randal Baker is the author of the latest book on race called simply *Race*. He was born on 23 October 1900, the son of Rear-Admiral Julian Baker. At present he is Emeritus Reader in Cytology at Oxford. His book, it is claimed, has taken over fifteen years to produce and is concerned with every aspect of the biological differences between groups except their application to practical affairs. This might seem too large a scope for one man but Baker claims that almost all specialists could 'have grasped every aspect of the subject had they wished' (p. ix). It exhibits many characteristics of thorough 'scholarship' 625 pages, 1,181 references to manifold authorities and it is written in a cautious and scholarly style.

However, books are not to be evaluated merely on their appearances. Since this is an attempt to apply scientific understanding to controversial issues it ought to be evaluated on the strictest standards. First of all I shall sketch Baker's argument and then make appropriate comments.

### *Baker's Argument*

Baker begins by reviewing the historical views about racial equality of such persons as Rousseau, Kant, Hume, Voltaire etc. He shows by direct quotation that each of these thinkers, many of whom were irreligious and 'progressive' in their politics, believed in the inequality of races in general and the inferiority of the Black. Sometimes these opinions are expressed quite forthrightly. For example, Baker quotes Kant: 'The Negroes of Africa have received from nature no intelligence that rises above the foolish' (p. 19).

Later, distinguished scientists became interested in racial issues. Blumenbach suggests that there was only one species of man, the Caucasian, and the others arose from the process of 'degeneration'. Biologists debated which races were closer to the apes and generally chose the Negro.

Gobineau, a widely read man 'who had exceptional understanding of human nature' (p. 35), wrote his famous *Essay on the Inequality of Races* from 1853-5. His aim was to discover how civilizations rose and fell and it

was serious thought on this problem which led him to consider racial explanations. He argued that environment is unsatisfactory as an explanation and was convinced that race and interbreeding were the key to proper understanding. The superiority of a race is decided by its capacity to originate a civilization. As it turned out, all civilizations can be traced to the work of Aryans. The dogma of the unity of the human species was attacked. Carl Vogt, for example, put forward the thesis of convergent and independent evolution. Galton applied rigorous mathematical techniques to the race problem. By his calculations he showed that very intelligent dogs had a greater intelligence than many men of less than average intelligence.

Nietzsche, who has been associated with Nazi propaganda was an anti-equalitarian but generally opposed to race-hatred and speaks favourably of Jews. Lapouge, who was well acquainted with biological knowledge, was convinced of the superiority of *Homo europaeus*, while Houston Chamberlain essentially a historian saw the *Germanen* as the major source of western culture.

Oswald Spengler, a man of intellect and erudition, in his *The Decline of the West* put forward a cyclical pattern of history and prophesied the decline of the West. Hitler, unlike the others, did not affect *thoughts* but directed himself to *actions* and this cannot but give rise to a sense of shock to the reader (p. 59). Baker claims to have given 'an objective account of the ethnic controversy' (p. 59).

He points out, since the 1930s, those who believed in the inequality of races have been compelled to keep quiet for fear of being accused of supporting Germany (p. 61). However, in 1928 Pitrim Sorokin, in his *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, stated 'clearly and shortly, the views of both sides in the controversy. Sorokin's chapter is well worth reading today . . .' Baker here ends his historical survey and begins to consider biological background.

It is pointed out that classification of species and sub-species is to some extent controversial. It can only be done by those with a special gift for it. It used to be thought that members of one species could be distinguished by their interfertility, but as the author shows, under domestication clearly different species have been known to breed though to produce offspring with reduced fertility. Equally two different subspecies have often been almost indistinguishable by sight though they will not breed in the wild. Subspecies that are left in isolation will gradually evolve into new species and lose the ability to interbreed eugenistically. Domestication apparently leads to sexual chaos, dogs approaching pigs, not to mention bestiality in man. In the case of man the evidence of interfertility did not conclusively show that different races were eugenistically interfertile and therefore could not be appealed to for deciding upon the unity of the human race (p. 97).

This author's general view about the origin of human races is that they arose from independent parallel and convergent evolution from different subspecies of apes. Some lines, however, evolved further than others. Two genetic phenomena are important here: mimicry and paedomorphosis. It is found in nature that one animal from a different species will often 'mimic'

the physical form of another, and that some animals show arrested development. This was probably due to no fault of their own but to the harsh environment selecting them in this way.

Colour has been known for long to be largely irrelevant to the taxonomy of race. On the other hand the author claims that the evidence suggests that different races smell differently and this may well be a most important factor in differentiating races. Missionaries and explorers were quite forthright in their recognition of the different smells of races (p. 175), though the use of tobacco may diminish present day abilities to discriminate finely.

Baker now comes to discuss the selected human groups. For the author statistical concepts of population are confused. If we want to have a working idea of a race we should consider the racial type which may not be statistically typical (p. 118). The Euroid race is quite extensive. It covers largely what used to be called the Aryans. Its sub-races include Jews, Arabs, Indians, Turks etc.

Of the Australian aborigines and Bushmen the author's considered opinion is best expressed in his own words:

'... the Australids are exceptional in the number and variety of their primitive characters and in the degree to which some are manifested . . . . It is questionable whether any other ethnic taxon of modern man shows so many resemblances to *Pithecanthropus* and to more remote ancestral forms' (p. 302).

'The importance of intellect in the self-preservation of man, and the deleterious effect of high temperature on mental activity, might well be supposed to result in the natural selection of small human beings in hot climates, and there would be no easier way in which such selection could act, than by the permanent prolongation of the juvenile form' (p. 305).

Baker then comes to consider the Negrids (Negroes). He points out that the best criteria for superiority and inferiority is that of 'the capacity or incapacity of a race to initiate a civilization' (p. 325). Relying upon the first-hand reports of explorers and missionaries, he portrays what he considered to be an objective unbiased account of how Africans lived before foreign influence. The picture is one of men who bought their wives by payment to the girl's father, of people whose dances involved 'the most indecent gestures' (p. 380), who lived in permanent dread of ghosts, of witch-doctors who 'fantastically dressed and decorated with strange objects such as the inflated gall-bladders of cattle . . .' had by trickery 'obtained enormous and baneful influence over the people among whom they lived' (p. 382). Many of the Negrid people had no idea of immortality (p. 384) nor any general word equivalent to 'religion'. In some areas there was 'the total absence of any law but that of the strongest — the almost total ignoring of the right of property' (p. 389).

Though the Negrids possessed their own music, no good art is truly theirs for the Ife bronzes were most probably done by wandering Greek sculptors (p. 417). The Vai script which was once claimed to be a genuinely Africa

script turns out to be derivative. All this refers basically to the Negrid past, but if we consider the present we discover that 'it must be allowed that the contributions of Negrids to the world of learning have, on the whole, been disappointing, despite all the improvements in facilities for their education' (p. 503). It is not the purpose of the book to advocate any political action but merely to consider the facts which suggest that natural selection has not favoured Negrid persons as bright as Europid persons. These conclusions are the result of an apparently heavily documented and carefully researched work.

*Bad News for Baker: Some Critical Comments*

It is quite clear that the focus of Baker's book is on Black people, specifically Black Africans but also Australian Aborigines. As has been said it has the appearance of sound scholarship but what is the reality behind this?

In the historical introduction Baker claims to give an objective comprehensive account of the ethnic controversy in history. He also refers to Sorokin's chapter 'Anthropo-racial, selectionist, and Hereditarist School' in his *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (1928) as expressing 'clearly and shortly, the views of both sides in the controversy'. But Baker's account of racial thinking till Hitler is inadequate in that it gives prominence to those writers who favour the inequality of races or stress racial differences and overlook some of the standard histories<sup>1</sup> — thereby giving a misleading impression of the debate. As for Sorokin's chapter, it does not give both sides as it gives only one side, nor is it at ninety pages in any way short (being half as long again as Baker's discussion). Nor is it true, as Baker claims, that Sorokin supported neither 'side'. Sorokin's own conclusions are expressed as follows:

that there are mental differences among races seem also to be definitely established . . . . Their existence is witnessed in the first place by the quite different part which has been played by the various races in the history of mankind, and in their cultural achievements. Though almost all of these types have been given an opportunity to create the complex forms of civilization.<sup>2</sup>

Baker claims to be objective, but in introducing the work of Gobineau he writes: 'The book is quietly and effectively written and is *obviously* the product of a cultured and well-informed person' (p. 35) [my italics] and, speaking of Houston Chamberlain's work: 'It is *obviously* the work of an earnest and serious-minded person, the possessor of much detailed historical knowledge bearing on his problem.' (p. 50) [my italics] Gobineau and Chamberlain have a central place in any history of racist theory.

When discussing Hitler, Baker writes 'Hitler could not restrain himself from the exaggerated, untrue, and purely abusive remarks' (p. 60) about Jews, but when Lord Monboddoo says that chimpanzees 'carry off negro girls, whom they make slaves of', Baker is silent. 'Purely abusive' remarks depend, it seems, upon who is being abused.

Baker's account of these historical authors cannot go unquestioned. Take the case of Gobineau, where Baker's account is basically a variation of Sorokin's which was not accurate in the first place. He asserts

his racial theories. The truth is that he had been led to his racial theories by reading the racial historians, Francois Hotman, Adrian de Valois and Henri de Boulanviller, his reading of Sanskrit philology and in connection with his reactionary interest in the internal politics of France.<sup>3</sup>

The academic nature of Gobineau's interest in race is best illustrated by quotation:

The Negroid variety is the lowest, and stands at the foot of the ladder. The animal character, that appears in the shape of the pelvis, is stamped on the Negro from birth, and foreshadows his destiny. His intellect will always move within a very narrow circle . . . . If his mental faculties are dull or even non-existent, he often has an intensity of desire, and so of will, which may be called terrible . . . . The very strength of his sensations is the most striking proof of his inferiority. All food is good in his eyes, nothing disgusts or repels him.<sup>4</sup>

This is from a book which Baker says is 'quietly and effectively written'.

Equally Baker's discussion of Nietzsche is grossly inaccurate and neglects the standard work on Nietzsche by W. Kaufman.<sup>5</sup>

Baker claims that since the 1930s disbelievers in human equality have been unable to publish. This is rather strange, as assertions of Negro inferiority by scientists have been responsible for a continuous stream of articles and books by Ashley Montagu<sup>6</sup> over those decades. Stranger still, since Baker ends one of his own books in the 1940s with an appeal to scientists to 'show the reality of their belief in the liberty, fraternity, and *inequality of man*'<sup>7</sup>.

When it comes to examining Baker's biological data the critical reader is confronted with a problem: Baker fails to distinguish between *empirical evidence* and the hearsay of past scientists. This is particularly disconcerting as Baker dismisses all modern approaches to genetics (e.g. population genetics) in one sentence. This is the same Baker who in 1942 wrote that 'science is precisely that subject in which authority counts for nothing . . . every scientist knows that discoveries must be demonstrable, for no-one will take them on anyone's authority.'<sup>8</sup> *Most of Baker's biological data comes from the nineteenth century with no corroboration from recent research.*

Much attention is focused in the blurb to Baker's theory that odour is a distinguishing quality of races. Baker quotes the following in support of it: (a) Negroes are distinguished by their 'bestial or fetid smell, which they all have to a greater or lesser degree . . . . This scent in some of them is so excessively strong . . . that it continues in places where they have been near a quarter of an hour.'; (b) the smell of the Negro 'is sometimes offensive to an appalling degree, rendering it well nigh impossible to remain in a closed room with him.'; (c) the odour of Negroes has been described as 'ammoniacal and rancid; it is like the odour of the he-goat'. (p. 175)

Perhaps the respective dates of these quotations will shed some light. They are: (a) 1774, (b) 1897, (c) 1905. Generally Baker is hyperconscious about terminology so that only ignorance could explain his not knowing that the proper name of the science of odour is *olfactronics*. But this is not surprising as he does not refer to any of the recent research by B.K. Krotos-

zynski and Andrew Dravinecks of I.I.T.R.I. Among other things they were asked to research into differences of smell between Blacks, Whites and Indians.<sup>9</sup> Curiously, Baker does not mention the time-worn complaint of the aristocracy that the lower classes smell.

Baker reintroduces many of the dangerous nineteenth century notions such as that of *racial degeneration*, which he claims is due to domestication and consequent indiscriminate breeding. Is it not forgivable if one concluded from this that surrounded by *degeneration*, only strong and forceful action can save the day? There is no difference between the above and Nazi doctrines. Another nineteenth century notion he revives is the idea that Black/White marriages do not produce perfectly fertile offspring. He has no evidence for it. He simply claims that the evidence *against* it is not absolutely conclusive. But put like that it ignores the fact that all the available evidence is *against* the idea that 'inter-racial breeding' leads to 'degeneration' (in fact in Baker's view interracial sexual relations *prevent* further human evolution.) (p. 177).

When one comes to consider his extra-ordinary thesis of the pedomorphic nature of 'Sanids' one needs only to remember that this is a scientific version of the old saying well-known to Afrikaaners, that Blackmen are really children.

Baker also reintroduces the nineteenth century phrenological speculation, i.e. the idea that the skull size and shape reflects mind content.

It is time to examine Baker's views on Black people. Of the brain of Aborigines he writes: 'The gyri (convolutions) of the cerebral hemispheres are said to be simpler in arrangement and less tortuous than those of Europeans.' (p. 292)

There are two sources for this statement for his statement, one is from 1904, the other 1888! Baker's opinion of Aboriginal intelligence is very low. He does not care, however, to quote Rev. J. Mathew (1899) who pointed out that 'the aboriginal school at Ramahyuck in Victoria, stood for three consecutive years the highest of state schools of the colony in examination results . . .'<sup>10</sup>

When dealing with Africa history, Baker tends to rely upon very old explorers' accounts, and writes 'I think the evidence is *indisputable* that they reported what they say and gave a reliable general impression of many aspects of the Negrid life of their times', (p. 348) [my italics] and also, specifically of Du Chaillu, that 'his descriptions of the natives and their customs appear to be factual, objective, and unprejudiced'. (p. 347) No independent evidence whatsoever is given for these assertions. In fact Du Chaillu's lack of prejudice can be illustrated by the following statement about some Black people: 'They seem to be made for slavery and naturally fall into its ways' (p. 365).

Hence Baker's portrait of Africa can be misleading. For instance, he asserts that Africans simply bought their wives from the girl's father (p. 377). He is here giving a long refuted view about the dowry system. His interpre-

tation of African religions as simply dread of spirits (p. 381) is the old story of Africans being utterly superstitious. No reference is given to modern work on African religion. African 'witch-doctors' are treated as utter tricksters fraudulently manipulating the people (p. 382). No reference is made to the work done by modern psychiatrists in Africa on their methods. One quotation here is sufficient. It is Dr. T.A. Lambo who says that

About three years ago we made an evaluation, a programme of their work, and compared this with our own, and we discovered that actually they were scoring almost sixty per-cent success in their treatment of neurosis. And we were scoring forty per-cent – in fact, less than forty per-cent.<sup>12</sup>

Baker suggests that the Ife bronzes were done by the Greeks (p. 417). I say old chap, this is a bit much, really, I mean not seriously . . .?<sup>13</sup> When he discusses writing in Africa he claims that the possession of writing is often claimed to be a sign of civilization. One does not have to support the idea of literacy being a criteria of civilization to point out that Black Africa *does* have an indigenous system, the Nsidibi,<sup>14</sup> the ancient alphabetical writing of Meroe, the hieroglyphic of Egypt, and various other writing systems.<sup>15</sup> The Egyptian civilization was in origin a Black African civilization and the product of earlier African civilizations.<sup>16</sup>

Baker sums up his position by arguing that perhaps evolution has not favoured either the same levels of intelligence or the same kind of intelligence in different races. The view that evolution favours no kind of intelligence but general plasticity and educability, which was argued by T. Dobzhansky and Ashley-Montagu, is not mentioned.<sup>17</sup> In fact Baker argues that many population geneticists are genetically incapable of understanding what he is doing (pp. 118 and 485).

Some comments about a few of Baker's underlying assumptions are appropriate here. Baker stipulates that he is interested not so much in whether Africans can make civilizations but in whether they could make such civilizations alone without 'foreign' influence. If we apply this criteria to European history we obtain absurd results. If Newton had been an African he would not have been counted as evidence of African intellectual ability for Newton was greatly indebted to a past tradition and to previous contributions by Galileo *et al* so that he could not be said to have invented his theories on his own. But do we feel it in any way reprehensible that Newton was influenced by these 'foreign' ideas? Rather we count it as his merit that he could be so influenced, unless one subscribes to such things as 'racial ideas'.

### *Last Judgement*

Baker's book has been written within a social context of rising racial tensions with increasing attacks upon the West. Carleton S. Coon explicitly makes this point: 'The success of these groups (the Europeans) is being challenged in many parts of the world as other groups who evolved later learn to use their inventions, especially modern means of communication'.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of this he calls on his fellow Europeans to defend the 'genetic *status quo*'. Other voices are chiming in that man is naturally aggressive and that imperialistic wars and hierarchical social orders are part of our evolutionary genetic make-up.<sup>19</sup> As in the Nazi era, Nobel prize-winners have been found to lend their prestige to such utterances.

When they elaborate a systematic philosophy we discover that the voice is familiar and often the words themselves. Instinctively these people see their affinity with nineteenth century Social Darwinists. Social Darwinism is basically a doctrine of *predestination*; people are born to their rightful social position. Social mechanisms embodied in the free-market of opportunity will allocate them to their rightful position.

More often than not these people, Baker being a good example, have to abandon all the conventional academic standards. Eysenck reviewing Baker's book wrote: 'This is clearly an outstanding book which will be the standard work on this difficult subject for years to come.'<sup>20</sup> Eysenck is not yet known for his extensive knowledge of African culture and history. The one escapade of his into that area that I know of I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> It is rather surprising then that he should write that: 'Of particular importance is Baker's discussion of the cultural achievements of the Negrids . . . Few readers will be familiar with this material, and as always Baker is judicious, fair, but unafraid to come to fairly definite conclusions.'

As Margaret Mead pointed out in a different context: 'These statements, which have drawn on inadequate, discredited, and inappropriate evidence to make blanket statements about the Negro, often carry the names of those who have held respectable academic positions . . .'<sup>22</sup>

Though it is the case that these Social Darwinists have had to use deceit and distortion to make their point, I wish to assert that a racist society tends objectively to produce a racist science, an inhumane society tends objectively to produce an inhumane science. Elsewhere I will argue these points in detail.<sup>23</sup>

Aimé Césaire presented in the early fifties an analysis of the intellectual charade of which Baker is merely an instance. Césaire wrote: 'One cannot say that the petty bourgeois has never read anything. On the contrary, he has read everything, devoured everything.

'Only, his brain functions after the fashion of certain elementary types of digestive systems. It filters. And the filter lets through only what can nourish the thick skin of the bourgeois' clear conscience.'<sup>24</sup>

Like Gobineau, the modern Social Darwinists are defenders of a declining class, protectors of an indefensible status quo. This does not mean that they are harmless, for in the process of being defeated they could cause untold hardship. It is because of this that they must be relentlessly attacked.<sup>25</sup> This has been clearly seen by Césaire whom I will allow the last judgement:

'We must resign ourselves to the inevitable and say to ourselves, once for all, that the bourgeoisie is condemned to become every day more snarling, more openly ferocious, more shameless, more summarily barbarous, that it is



an implacable law that every decadent class finds itself turned into a receptacle into which there flow all the dirty waters of history; that it is a universal law that before it disappears, every class must first disgrace itself completely, in all fronts, and that it is with their heads buried in the dung-hill that dying societies utter their swan songs.<sup>12 7</sup>

Clare College, Cambridge

O.A. LADIMEJI

### References

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- 2 P. Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (1928), p. 291.
- 3 See, M. Biddiss, *Father of Racist Ideology: the Social and Political Thought of Count Gobineau* (1970).
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- 5 W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche* (1950 and 1968).
- 6 A. Montagu, *Race, Science and Humanity* (1962), *The Concept of Race* (1966), *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1965), etc; see also M. Mead (ed.) *Science and the Concept of Race* (1968).
- 7 J.R. Baker, *Science and the Planned State* (1945), p. 109 [my italics], see also, C.D. Darlington, *The Conflict of Science and Society* (1948).
- 8 J.R. Baker, *The Scientific Life* (1942), p. 40.
- 9 M.T. Klare, *War Without End* (1972), p. 171.
- 10 Quoted in Montagu, *Race, Science and Humanity*, p. 137.
- 11 Quoted in B. Davidson, *Which Way Africa?* (1971 edn.), p. 57.
- 12 Quoted in B. Davidson, *The Africans* (1969), p. 155.
- 13 Among several good books, see R.P. Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence* (1971).
- 14 See, E. Obiechina, 'The Growth of Written Literature in English-speaking West Africa', *The Conch* (1969).
- 15 Kathleen Hau, 'Pre-Islamic Writing in Africa', *Bulletin de l'Institute Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire* (1973), pp. 1-45.
- 16 C.A. Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization* (1973) and C.A. Diop, 'Pigmentation de la Melanine des Egyptiennes', *Bulletin de l'Institute Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire* (1973).
- 17 'Natural Selection and the Mental Capacities of Mankind', reprinted in Ashley Montagu, *Race, Science and Humanity*.
- 18 C.S. Coon, *The Origin of Races* (1963), p. 663.
- 19 See the works of Ardrey, Lorenz and many pop-ethologists. For a critical volume see, Ashley Montagu (ed.), *Man and Aggression* (1973). An article on Gobineau and Social Darwinism which appeared in the Cambridge journal, *Granta*, in 1973 was wrongly attributed to me. It was in fact written by the editors, based on my materials. The errors are theirs.
- 20 H. Eysenck, 'Races Apart', *New Society* (14 February 1974), for another review, see, also Theya Molleson, *New Scientist* (28 February 1974).
- 21 See, O.A. Ladimeji, 'Flew and the Revival of Social Darwinism', *Philosophy* (1974), p. 98.

22 M. Mead, op. cit.

23 In the first issue of the forthcoming *African Journal of Science, Technology and Society*, to be published by New Beacon Books in the autumn.

24 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972 ed.), p. 31.

25 For some critical literature, see K. Richardson and D. Spears, *Race, Culture and Intelligence* (1972), *Racism, Intelligence and the Working Class* (P.L.P. pamphlet, 1973) and Steven Rose et al., 'Science, Racism and Ideology', *Socialist Register, 1973* (1974).

26 Césaire, op. cit.