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Bob Blauner

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BOOK REVIEWS

Black Lives, White Lives: Three Decades of Race Relations in America. By Bob Blauner. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1989. Pp. 347.

Cranston Williams

Bob Blauner's *Black Lives, White Lives* provides unique insight into the personal views Black and White Americans hold on racial issues confronting American society. Professor Blauner uses interviews conducted with various Black and White Americans as the basis for his work. He weaves their personal tales into a comprehensive comment on the status of race relations in America.

Professor Blauner interviewed over 350 people to gain a fair cross-section of views for his study, however, only 28 personal histories are actually depicted in his book. He felt that the 16 Blacks and 12 Whites chosen represented an accurate assessment of the main themes of his research. The ages of the interviewees range from 18 to 65; there are 11 women; the employment status includes students, unemployed, menial laborers, blue collar workers and professionals; the political viewpoints include radical, liberal and conservative.

The subjects of *Black Lives, White Lives* are first interviewed in the 1960's. Follow-up interviews are conducted in the 1970's and 1980's to address new and evolving issues and to also track the development of personal views on racial issues. Professor Blauner did not conduct all the interviews himself and where possible he had White interviewers interview White subjects and Black interviewers interview Black subjects. These steps were taken to elicit the frankest comment from the interviewees.

The personal tales depicted in *Black Lives, White Lives* include contact with members of the other race; views on the Black Power movement, Martin Luther King Jr., integration, Black nationalism, the non-violence movement, Stokely Carmichael, the role of the police, the Black Panthers, and perceived racism in the workplace, school, in the law and in other institutional areas. Black interviewees were specifically asked to comment on the following: how being Black affected an individual's manhood or womanhood, the strengths and weaknesses of being Black in America, and the roles of males and females in Black culture. White interviewees were asked the following: whether racism existed in America, their views on affirmative action and their views on interracial marriages. The responses to the questions were free flowing and incorporated many personal experiences of the interviewee. The book contains many vivid accounts of racial incidents and sentiments that a reader would only be privy to if he or she had access to a personal diary. Professor Blauner frames the stories related by both Black and White Americans so that they attack the senses of the reader and force him or her to confront the reality of racism in America.

The first part of *Black Lives, White Lives* contains the interviews conducted in the 1960's. The second part contains the follow-up interviews of

both the 1970's and 1980's. Professor Blauner places his own summary and interpretations in the introduction to each part. He also includes brief comments throughout each chapter to help the reader follow the course of the interviews.

The interviews conducted in the sixties are typically the most extensive of the three interviews conducted with each individual. The personal histories are laid out in the initial interview, which also includes the individual's views on racial issues. The initial interviews provide an introduction to each individual and provide a framework with which the follow-up interviews of the seventies and eighties track changing or constant personal views.

The interviews of Black Americans conducted in the sixties contain vivid account of specific racist acts encountered while living the the south. These memories were fresh in the minds of the interviewees and were incorporated into their personal histories with little or no solicitation by the interviewer. In addition, the Black individuals freely discussed the role of the Black male in American society. Blacks considered both economic and political strength important requirements of their ideal male. It was important to them for a Black man to be able to stand up for his rights. Conversely, the Whites interviewed did not attach the same significance to the White male. The comments had to be solicited by the interviewer and then the focus was on the family provider aspect of manhood.

The former southern Blacks told of their disillusionment with the northern and western regions of America. They felt that they still confronted racism, but it was concealed within the system. The Blacks interviewed seemed to be keenly attuned to racial consciousness in America. The topic was a focal point of many interviews. Conversely, the Whites interviewed were not as aware of any racial consciousness; most of them did not connect their racial classification with their status as Americans.

A majority of the Black women interviewed in the sixties, although exhibiting Black pride and general anti-White sentiments, were not willing to totally condemn White people. Most of the Black women interviewed also supported the Black Power movement. The women claimed that they did not always understand the actions of the movement, but supported it because of its positive effects on the otherwise dire political and economic situation of Black Americans. Many Black women shared a fear of the police, expressing concern for the safety of Black male relatives. The inclusion of interviews with a Black female middle class student and a young Black female clerical worker show that problems of class distinction existed among Blacks and that views on Black power were not uniform throughout the Black community. Most of the older Black males interviewed shared similar views to those already stated.

The sixties interviews with young Black males had two common threads: a strong anti-White sentiment and a basic hatred towards the police force. The interviews also bring to light varying views that Blacks brought with them into the decade of the sixties. The older Black males had always done what it took to survive and could not understand the backlash of the young. Many young Blacks responded to the changes of the sixties by refusing to become part of the White establishment. These young Blacks were not forced to bend to the will of White America and the different viewpoints are evident when comparing the interviews.

The interviews conducted with the White subjects during the sixties seem to take either one of two views: extremely conservative or extremely liberal. The conservative Whites were angered by the change in race relations in the sixties. The civil rights movement forced a change of the status quo. The comfortable existence that Whites had come to know was shattered and they were forced to look in the mirror and take an account of themselves. The majority of the Whites interviewed disliked this development and blamed Blacks for creating problems. They went as far as labeling Martin Luther King a rabble rouser and trouble maker. They feared that Blacks would take over the country and upset the "proper" racial balance.

The White blue collar workers tended to be more attuned to the distinctions between the races because social change had opened up many factory jobs which had before been closed to Blacks and interaction was somewhat commonplace. The Whites disagreed with affirmative action plans, favoring instead hiring and promotion based on merit, regardless of any mitigating factors. The blue collar worker characterized the ideal Black as one with whom he could exchange racial jokes and slurs. This resulted in a lot of friction between Black men and blue collar workers in the sixties. The interaction between White and Black workers ended at the five o'clock whistle at which time Whites went their way and Blacks went theirs. Whites had little or no understanding of Black people or their culture and interracial marriages were considered taboo.

The liberal and "hippie"-type Whites interviewed during the sixties tended to support the Black power movement. They befriended Blacks and offered support where possible, but there appears to be little true understanding of the plight of Black Americans. The motivation behind White action seems to have been White guilt and the fact that the civil rights movement was the cause of the moment. This idea is supported by the fact that in their follow-up interviews, these Whites had not sustained their involvement with the Black "cause".

The seventies and eighties follow-up interviews with Blacks show concern over the failure of the civil rights movement to improve the position of poor Blacks. The emphasis of the interviews moved from the institutional change of the sixties to the traditional values of family, education and responsibility. The Black women interviewed began to incorporate their desires to be equals as women with their desires for Black equality. The Blacks from the south found that the changes in that region were greater and more effective than those in the north and west. The Black youth are viewed as having no political interests in the Black movement; they are viewed as having joined the over-all American trend towards individualism. The Black view on integration is conflicting: there is one faction that believes that it has failed Blacks and the opposing view is that it has eradicated much of Black culture. The youngest Black males had struggled to make the transition from the sixties to the seventies and eighties. They had periodic bouts with drugs, crime, jail, welfare, and unemployment.

The follow-up interviews with Whites showed a basic satisfaction with the improvement Blacks had made since the sixties. The majority of Whites were no longer concerned with the status of Blacks in America; they viewed the civil rights movement as a success and have refocused their thought on

their individual concerns. The Whites interviewed had little or no subsequent contact with Blacks, but based on what they had seen in the media felt that Blacks were better off. It appears that the Whites are content that the tumult of the sixties are over and they can return to less socially significant personal thoughts. In fact, the only racial issues of concern are affirmative action and interracial marriage, two issues which would affect them directly. The larger social concerns of poverty, drugs and crime in the inner cities are of little or no concern.

Professor Blauner has provided an informative work. However, there are a few shortcomings, not all of which he acknowledges. He recognizes that his interviews are limited to the west coast, but it appears from the nature of the stories conveyed that the problems are not unique to the west. In addition, he recognizes that the work's greatest flaw is that he did not interview any young Americans in his interviews of the seventies or eighties. Professor Blauner provides some commentary of young Americans in those decades, but he does not supplement them with any interviews. The views of the young are voiced when the older people comment on their children and the youth they have had contact with.

There are a few critiques that Professor Blauner does not address. His observations include information taken from those interviews that are published as well as those that are not. It would be helpful if he provided information on his other interviewees. A few charts or tables with the demographics of all the subjects would lend more credibility to his comments. In addition, the personal interviews that make it to publication may not be truly representative of the pool of interviews conducted, they may be just the most compelling. The Black male youths all had encounters with drugs, crime or unemployment. It may be the case that many Black males encounter these problems, but it also portrays a more dramatic picture in addition to supporting Professor Blauner's social commentary. Finally, Professor Blauner emphasizes the fact that he uses members of the same race to interview his subjects. However, he does not strictly adhere to this practice, especially in his later interviews. This circumstance possibly compromised the candor of the responses received and there is no way to determine if the interviewees were being as honest as possible. It is important to note that the comments relayed by the White interviewees to Black interviewers are fairly open and if they are holding back at all, the situation is worse than portrayed.

Black Lives, White Lives is a commendable work and any person can benefit from the experience of reading it. Professor Blauner's work portrays the Black experience in America from both the Black and White perspective. The portrayals are extremely personal and draw the reader in so that he or she becomes vicariously involved. The work provides insight into the emotions of Americans and enlightens all readers as to the realities of being Black in America. Professor Blauner deserves praise for his effort. It is insightful, enjoyable, compelling and well-presented. It should be read by all Americans because it addresses important issues that we all seem too comfortable disregarding in our effort to achieve individual success.

The Civil War: An Illustrated History. By Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns, Ken Burns. New York, NY: Knopf, 1990. Pp. iv, 425. \$50.00

Herbert Aptheker*

I

This best-selling coffee-table size book of 425 pages is a companion volume to the PBS television program seen by millions. It contains over five hundred illustrations, most of them contemporary photographs; they are dramatic and often gripping—particularly those conveying something of the gruesome quality of warfare.

The major portion of the text is provided by the authors listed above and concentrates mainly on descriptions of major battles and campaigns. Where it enters into historical interpretation it is conventional and often erroneous. In addition to the factual errors, significant omissions are made about vital aspects of the War, minimizing the significance of the War's historical impact.

The book does convey something of the decisive role of the African-American in the inter-related reality of the War—namely, the ending of slavery and the salvation of the Republic. The work of others for the past fifty years on the reality has finally forced its way into this kind of major enterprise.

Even here, however, the account is partial and not free of significant mistakes. For example, there is almost nothing on the very significant role of the African-American in the Union Navy, where they constituted perhaps twenty percent of the total force. Almost nothing is said of the 250,000 African-American men and women who labored for the Union forces in dozens of vital capacities, such as fortification builders, wagon-drivers, cooks, nurses, pilots, scouts and what a later army called combat engineers. There is no word of the role the slaves and other African-American people played as the eyes and ears of the Union forces. Military intelligence is indispensable to victory and, as dozens of Union officers reported, that intelligence came most often from the Black people who knew the South at least as well as anyone else.

Even as to the Army, where African-American participation is dealt with in text and illustrations, the coverage is not careful. Thus, the number of African-Americans in Lincoln's army on one page is given as 180,000 (p.xix) and on another as 185,000 (p. 252). The fact is, as this reviewer showed many years ago, the number came to at least 200,000 (a figure, by the way, used by Lincoln) because many of the regiments hitherto considered White, had in fact some Black troops. Note might also have been taken of the greater casualties among Black troops—probably as much as a third higher than White, though they were not permitted to fight for some two years after Fort Sumter was attacked.

The treatment of the Abolitionist movement is both hostile and misinformed. Its nature and influence are misrepresented. At times egregious

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errors are made. For example the character of the gag rule in the pre-Civil War Congress and the nature of the Dred Scott decision are both falsified (pp. 16, 24).

The international aspect of the War is ignored though it is vital to the War's comprehension. The War related in important ways to English, Russian and French history; it affected conditions in Haiti; and the Mexican question—given France's intervention and Mexican resistance thereto—was of great concern to Lincoln. The Civil War's outcome was a decisive blow to the African slave trade, and consequential in undoing slavery in Cuba and Brazil. It contributed to progressive political developments in Canada and in Great Britain. The role of the European working class—especially that of Great Britain—in deterring intervention on the side of the Confederacy was very important. Indeed, Lincoln sent a message expressing gratitude for this to the International Workingmen's Association, whose general secretary was Karl Marx.

The awakening of the working class was not confined to Europe, however. The Civil War also stimulated working-class consciousness in the United States. In fact, the modern history of its political and trade-union activity really begins with the War and its immediate aftermath. This is the meaning of Du Bois's great insight when he remarked that the Emancipation Proclamation was a major event in *labor* history. No hint of any of this is in this massive volume.

Omitted, too, is the role of the Native American in the War. This was a matter of major concern to the administrations of both Lincoln and Davis. It is long past time that serious attention be paid to this.

II

There are essays by four specialists in Civil War history which on the whole add to the volume's value. This is especially true of the contribution by Professor Barbara J. Fields on "Who Freed the Slaves?," which concludes that the African-American people played a decisive role in their emancipation. I do think, however, that Professor Fields presents Lincoln in too negative a fashion vis-a-vis slavery and the commitment to end it. Her view here is quite conventional and thus, not surprisingly, one-sided.

Professor Fehrenbacher's essay on "Why the War Came" is insightful. Its weakness, in my opinion, is the lack of attention given to the internal disaffection of slaves and poor whites which reached a critical point from 1850 to 1860 and helped drive the slaveholding class to the state of desperation which propelled its forcible attempt to overthrow the government.

This disaffection intensified during the War itself. While some attention is paid to the wholesale flight of slaves and Confederate soldiers, little mention is made of other forms of slave discontent and of the mounting disaffection of the mass of poor white Southerners, especially the women.

Professor McPherson's effort is limited to an examination of the crucial year of 1864. In the early part of that year it appeared that Lincoln, and the positive purpose of the War, faced defeat; but by November Lincoln was re-elected overwhelmingly. McPherson emphasizes justly the truly treasonous character of the so-called Peace Democrats in that campaign.

The greatest space for any expert is that given to Shelby Foote; he is

afforded nearly four times more pages than the others. Foote's contribution is distasteful. His hero—and the main authors sympathize with the view—is General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Foote refers to Forrest as one of the two “authentic geniuses” of the War—the other one being Lincoln! (p. 270). When one knows that Forrest was a millionaire land speculator and slave trader, the commanding officer responsible for killing three hundred prisoners (most of them African-Americans and others White Southerners fighting for the Union) in the Fort Pillow Massacre, and the main founder of the Ku Klux Klan and then finds this criminal presented as a noble figure—a “genius,” no less—one is prepared for Foote's comment about the “cruel follow-through of Reconstruction” (p. 273). One is even prepared for the sympathetic rendering of the Mississippi myth engraved upon a monument presenting the Confederacy as “the only nation that was born and died without a sin having been committed on its part.” (p. 277) This of the Confederacy, based as its Vice-President boasted, on commitment to racism, and founded, as its Constitution explicitly stated, upon a commitment to slavery's perpetuity.

The book's closing pages are given to Professor C. Vann Woodward. His essay reflects Mr. Woodward's characteristically graceful prose and deliberate ambiguity. His tendency to equate the “moral absolutism” and “arrogance” and “headlong recklessness” and “paranoid suspicions” of the secessionist traitors with Wendell Phillips, one of the most admirable figures in U.S. history, belonging as he does with Frederick Douglass, is unjustified.

Another false portrayal in Woodward's essay is the presentation of John Brown as insane. The main authors use the same false characterization and malign the Abolitionists and falsify their purposes and influence throughout the text. In this connection it is relevant to observe the sympathy with which Edmund Ruffin of Virginia is presented: a leading slave-owner and rabid secessionist, who, as an old man made a special trip to Charlestown in what is now West Virginia so that he might view the hanging of Brown. So “outstanding” was this Ruffin in the defense of slavery that he was given the “honor” of firing the first round upon Fort Sumter. So fanatical was he that when he learned of Lee's surrender, he wrapped his head in the flag of the Confederacy and, belatedly, blew out his brains. But no professor has suggested questioning Ruffin's mental stability. On the contrary, we have in the literature—as in this book—nothing but respect for him, not to mention an admiring biography by the late Professor Avery Craven!

The “select bibliography” at the book's close is confined to White authors. Neither the work of Du Bois, nor Charles H. Wesley nor Benjamin Quarles, for example, is mentioned.

How frightful was the cost of expiating the crime of slavery! How awful has been the cost of racism—its rationalization, accompaniment and descendant.

Who can foretell what the annihilation of racism will demand? Yet, as Lincoln said of slavery, so must it be said of racism: “Until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

