
THE BLACK SCHOLAR BOOK REVIEWS

FROM SAVAGE TO NEGRO: ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACE, 1896-1954 by Lee Baker (University of California Press, 1998); ISBN: 0-52021-168-5. *Reviewed By* Thabiti A. Asukile

LEE BAKER MAY NOT KNOW IT, but he has delivered a tremendous blow to opponents who try to minimize the issue of race in America. *From Savage to Negro* is more than a historic academic discourse on race and anthropology. It is truly a remarkable elucidation of the construction of race in anthropology and its influence in American politics and must be read. The role anthropology has played in influencing American politics through the years of 1896-1954 is without a doubt remarkable. Baker traces the social construction of racial categories to the sixteenth century in England, and explains how the rise of capitalism and the Atlantic slave trade influenced the racialized European worldviews on both sides of the Atlantic:

By the end of the eighteenth century a whole new body of intellectual endeavors termed "science" had begun to emerge as a distinct domain of Western Culture that challenged theology and moral philosophy. Enlightenment writers saw science emanating from the "rational mind of man" unfettered by emotion of superstition, and by the middle of the eighteenth century science was becoming a dominant discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. (p.13)

Anthropology emerged during the middle of the nineteenth century, and three of the most influential American proponents of polygenesis—the theory that the different "races" of mankind have separate origins and share no common ancestors—were Samuel Morton, Josiah Nott, and Lois Agassiz. They were also all advocates of the idea of African inferiority. Baker effectively reasons how these anthropologists' modern day racism helped shape pro-slavery legislation like the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision. Baker writes, "From the mid-nineteenth century on, science provided the bases for the ideological elements of a comprehensive worldview summed up in the term *race*" (p.16). This type of racial discourse would continue into the latter part of the

nineteenth century, and would be integrated into many aspects of American life. Baker relates how racist anthropological ideology paved the way for domestic oppression and imperialism abroad.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL DARWINISM during the latter part of the nineteenth century came right in time for many of the progenitors of academic anthropology, such as Daniel G. Brinton, John Wesley Powell, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Nathaniel S. Shaler. Herbert Spencer's writings would revolutionize Social Darwinism, and it was his intellectualized racism combined with the rise of academic anthropology that help fabricated much of the discourse on race in America. Baker calls this "the Ascension of Anthropology as Social Darwinism" and provides great insights into the minds of Brinton, Powell, Morgan, and Shaler. This popularizing of Social Darwinism could also be found at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois. Baker provides enlightening information concerning the role ethnologists, and anthropologists played in shaping the view of most Americans that people of African descent were prone to immoral behavior.

Most important, Baker makes the historic connection between anthropologists' racism, US world expositions, and Booker T. Washington's own Social Darwinist ideas, that helped lead to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that legalized segregation in the United States. All these events coincided at the turn of the century, when African-Americans were literally portrayed as anything but human in most popular culture magazines. This racial propaganda influenced many US politicians who incorporated much of this ideology into their political speeches, Baker writes:

Anthropology, at the turn of the century was not distributed to the American public in magazines by anthropologists. It was appropriated and then rearticulated by policy pundits and legislators. Senators and House Representatives were perhaps the most powerful people to use ideas generated by anthropologists in these magazines. They used ethnology to sway public opinion in the North and fuel racial antipathy in the South. In this respect, legislators contributed to the anthropological

on race while making it even more valid.
(p.74)

IT WAS AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY that Social Darwinism would be strongly challenged by W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Boas. Baker dedicates a whole chapter to the importance of their work, and it is certainly one of the best chapters in *From Savage to Negro*. The intellectual discourse of Du Bois and Boas's episteme on race and culture has been controversial, and has been challenged by many academicians. However, Baker explains the main reason why their work was vital in America, and still is important a century later, "The efforts of Boas and Du Bois to change how scientists and public understood race and culture were not simply efforts to shift paradigms, they were struggles to secure the principles of democracy" (p.100).

Baker also investigates the importance of Negro folklore in anthropology and its connection with the Harlem Renaissance writers, and the *Journal of American Folklore*. The historical significance of these three areas definitely deserves more attention from future African American anthropologist and historians. Baker asserts: "the rise and fall of folklore within anthropology, and the relationship between the JAFL and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, is a story seldom told in the minds of the history of anthropology." (p.143). In looking back and bringing to our attention how important these factors were, Baker writes about pioneering African-Americans, especially women, who were unfortunately marginalized in the field of anthropology, such as: Arthur H. Fauset (1899-1983), Zora Neal Hurston (1891-1998), Katherine Dunham (1910-), and Irene Diggs (1906-1998). Baker's analysis of the importance of their work in relation to race, culture, and vindication of African-American culture is vitally important in reconstructing the history of anthropology.

At the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the discourse of African cultural survivals in America would stir great intellectual debates between academicians. Melvin Herskovits's and Robert Parks' theories about African continuities in America were antithetical. Parks believed that enslaved Africans in America left all of their cultural traits in Africa, as opposed to Herskovits and Boas, who insisted that certain aspects of African culture were recognizable in the so-called Americas. Parks' cultural notions would influence some of Howard University's greatest intellectuals, who would challenge the Boasian discourse on race and culture:

African American intellectuals, such as Arthur H. Fauset, Zora Neal Hurston, Arthur Schomburg, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. Du Bois, accepted and built on Boas's work to explain the so-called culture of the Negro. Other scholars, such as E. Franklin Frazier, Charles Ralph Bunche, and Guy B. Johnson, all members of the Howard circle, accepted the Boasian notion of racial equality but discarded the emphasis on cultural history. This group embraced the sociological view of Negro culture that Robert Parks advanced at the University of Chicago. (p.177)

THE INTELLECTUAL DEBATE of African continuity in America is important to understand because in relation to this discourse, Baker takes on Dinesh D'Souza's polemical judicial reasoning in *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multicultural Society* (1995). It is Baker's contention that D'Souza's analysis of cultural relativism being connected directly to proportional representation, which is the underpinning of American civil rights law, is totally erroneous. Baker traces the connection of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* case to the study of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). Myrdal did research on race relations in America, and was assisted by Frazier and Bunche. Baker informs us that: "Myrdal employed Frazier's basic arguments that all Negroes could obtain culture as 'legitimate' as the of Whites, but he articulated the notion that 'the simple folk culture of the Negro' was pathological with more force than Frazier did. In this important passage Myrdal vividly painted African American cultural relativity" (p.180-181).

D'Souza contends that Thurgood Marshall attacked segregation on the finding of Boasian relativism. However, Baker reasons that: "...Marshall only employed the Boasian notion of racial equality and not his ideas of cultural relativity in the arduous litigation leading to *Brown*. D'Souza's entire argument falls apart as well as one puts it in historical context or simple points out the LDEF attorneys rejected Boas's ideas of cultural relativity but embraced his idea of racial equality" (p.9).

It is in this historical context that Lee Baker addresses many of the major issues concerning anthropology, race culture, and politics in America from 1896-1954. Baker's last chapter entitled "Colored-Blind Bind" definitely leaves one with the impression that today there is no such thing as a colorblind America, especially within the scope of a modern conservative Supreme Court panel that promotes that kind of false ideological notion. Equally disturbing at the turn of a new millennium are scholars like the late Richard Her-

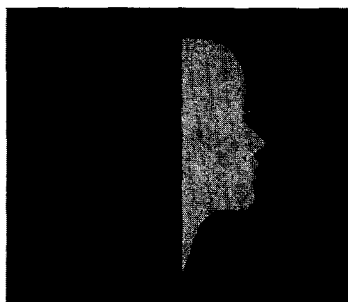
rnstein and Charles Murray who recently postulated that African-Americans' IQ is lower than white Americans'. Their book entitled *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994) provoked sharp criticism from many African-American scholars. Baker devotes much attention to this racially-charged scholarship, and argues that: "*The Bell Curve* dominated the public discourse on race at the same time the major parties were defining their respective positions on affirmative action, welfare reform, and minority-majority voting districts and the Supreme Court was deciding on the constitutionality of virtually identical issues" (p.216).

FROM SAVAGE TO NEGRO is an extraordinary piece of scholarship, it reveals critical insight into the historic role anthropology played in shaping racial politics in America from 1896-1954. Baker has explored some of the most controversial issues of that era, and has historicized it within the social and political realities that African-Americans face today in this so-called land of democracy. Almost a hundred years ago the great W.E.B. Du Bois postulated that, "...the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." This will also be a problem going into the new millennium, however, there will also be another problem, the denial of the significance of race in America. The willingness on the part of academicians, politicians, and many everyday people in America to put on guises and to downplay race as an issue in America. Baker succinctly summarizes this problem when he writes, "Although disregarding race is logically accurate and theoretically sound in terms of biological categories, it is historically, socially, and politically problematic. It disregards the complex process of racial formation and evades racism" (p.237). Hopefully, other African-American scholars will be able to build upon Baker's research and writing, and will not be afraid to take on those who mask the issue of race in America.



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