

Book Reviews

Tore Björge & Rob Witte (eds.): *Racist Violence in Europe*. New York: Macmillan, 1993, 261 pp.

Steven A. Shull: *A Kinder, Gentler Racism? The Reagan–Bush Civil Rights Legacy*. New York & London: M. E. Sharpe, 1993, 252 pp.

Towards Racist Violence or A Kinder, Gentler Racism?

The books reviewed here address themselves to racism – a most important topic – but from two quite different perspectives. In *Racist Violence in Europe*, edited by Tore Björge and Rob Witte, we find an analysis of racist violence from a European point of view. The book deals with a topic of current interest from perhaps the most frightening perspective, i.e. racism as an ideology of violence. Represented are fifteen authors presenting data from all over Europe. The authors represent different positions and offer somewhat different approaches, but they all have a common starting-point in describing circumstances related to violent racism. In the book by Steven A. Shull on the civil rights legacy of the Reagan–Bush era, the author raises the question of whether this legacy spells *A Kinder, Gentler Racism?*

The titles of the two volumes would seem to suggest that there might be important differences between Europe and the United States with respect to racism as an ideology. The European study focuses on the growth of inter-racial violence, while the US book is a study of institutional policy-making. But a closer inspection of the volumes lends little or no substance to this suspicion.

Racist Violence in Europe offers a very complex illustration of the character and extent of violent crimes committed against asylum-seekers, immigrants and minorities. The book presents results which lend themselves to new approaches towards racist violence. Some aspects particularly deserve to be emphasized. There is a number of possible definitions of racist violence as pointed out by the editors in the introductory chapter. But the definition they opt for is simple and straightforward. Racist violence (p. 6) refers to “any violence in which victims are selected because of their ethnic, ‘racial’, religious, cultural or national origin.”

The introductory chapter addresses itself to interpretations of violent acts and contains numerous references to the articles by the various contributors. This is standard procedure in edited volumes, but – as is often the case with edited volumes – the book falls somewhat short in terms of integration. The book would clearly have gained as a whole, if the individual contributors had made more of an effort to tie in explicitly with the general theme of racial violence and the interpretations thereof.

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comparisons when there are no comparable means of measuring violence in different countries. Whatever the case might be, the book provides a general view of the problems by pointing at differences in victims and types of crimes, as well as in perpetrators.

It is clearly meaningless to describe racist violence in Europe as a homogeneous kind of violence. The individual contributions convincingly demonstrate that racial violence should be seen as part of a process. As such, each single incident may not be regarded as very serious. It is the sum total which adds up to such a terrifying picture. There is no generally accepted system for classifying racial crimes, and comparisons between countries are therefore rendered extremely difficult. The role of the media varies immensely between European countries. A comparative approach is also complicated by differences with respect to target groups or potential victims. The uniqueness and specificity of the countries are most clearly brought out in the part of the book written by Katrin Reemtsma (chapter 14) describing the persecution of the Roma in Romania.

The major findings of the book may be summarized in terms of the different modes of explanation introduced by the editors at the outset and commented upon by most of the individual contributors at some length. *The level of racist violence is seen as being:*

- linked to the size of certain minority populations (or rather changes in official immigration policy),
- influenced by the response of authorities to racist violence. For example, the rapid increase in the number of crimes in Sweden in 1990 may be regarded as a result of a change to a more restrictive public immigration policy,
- linked to individual motives and group dynamics.

In a German context, Wilhelm Heitmeyer (chapter 2) makes the assumption that the more strongly social, occupational and political processes of disintegration develop in a society to which foreigners migrate, the greater the problems that these migrants will face in their integration. He claims that there is a very real risk that social, occupational, or political processes of disintegration will increase and issues a warning against the use of nationalism as a means of counteracting disintegration. Personal traits may also be of importance. Heléne Lööw shows (chapter 5) that it is mainly three kinds of people who belong to the National Socialist Party (NRP) in Sweden: the lonely and contact-seeking, the ideologists and the fanatics. Björge claims (chapter 7) that there is also a certain amount of ego-promotion in racist attacks. He argues that the attention of the national media may provide the perpetrators of racial violence – who tend to be losers in other social contexts – with a unique sense of importance and power.

When approaching racist violence in these terms, the Björge and Witte group goes well beyond so-called conventional wisdom which tends to interpret racist crimes in a rather innocent way that more or less exonerates the society of responsibility for them. *In this case, the level of racist violence is seen as being:*

- linked to “drunken pranks”. The perpetrator is simply a person interested in getting into fights, who under the influence of alcohol attacks randomly picked victims. The drunken prank thereby expresses a negative attitude that actually is intended as a response to the official immigration policy. The immigrant is looked upon only as a representative of immigrant community as a whole and the individual victims as unfortunate in being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Society can do little but express its sympathy for the victims and advise “target groups” to avoid situations where confrontations are more likely to

occur. Though influenced by racist propaganda, many of the known perpetrators described in the Björge and Witte volume were not organizationally involved. The relationship between racist violence and alcohol consumption was also more complicated than one might assume. The perpetrators are often drunk when committing the crimes, but that does not mean that the impact of racism is diminishing.

- linked to the influence and spread of extremist groups. This version of conventional wisdom has it that racist violence may be attributed to members of right-wing or neo-Nazi organizations. In contemporary Europe, these organizations tend to be small and marginal and there is little society can do about them apart from outlawing them and stepping up its surveillance of them.

The overall message is that there is no general kind, only various kinds of racist violence in Europe. This is a conclusion of major importance when it comes to comparing and evaluating the different kinds of racist violence related in the book. The comparisons will have to be confined to comparable aspects or dimensions to the extent that they have indeed been covered by the book.

The second book in this review, written by Steven A. Shull, is an attempt to examine whether presidents do achieve their political and policy goals. The focus is on the civil rights policies of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. This is an important work for those interested in understanding the exercise of power by presidents in the formulation and implementation of a policy process.

The book contains a sophisticated analysis of the development of public policy in the American political system and it is clearly of relevance from a methodological point of view. The title of the book – *A Kinder, Gentler Racism* – may be seen as a parody of George Bush's call for "a kinder and gentler America!" The author compares different policies and practices, but also differences across presidencies. The book does not discuss policies in terms of overt racism, at least not in the same way as the book edited by Björge and Witte. The main question Shull tries to answer is whether presidents make a difference when it comes to civil rights policy, and his study demonstrates that presidents can and do make a difference.

Generally, the book can be said to be structured according to a stimulus-response model. Stimuli (statements and actions by the presidents) incite a variety of responses (results of the statements and actions). The model helps to track the dynamics and interrelationships that occur in civil rights. Shull selects certain issue areas in order to examine the role and impact of the Reagan and Bush administrations within the field of civil rights. The areas included in the analysis are school desegregation, equal employment, and fair housing. The author draws attention to the dramatic changes in salience in civil rights over the past two generations which suggest a great deal of variance with respect to policy-making processes as well as issue areas. But he also emphasizes that major changes in public policy at any given time are rare, and that changes, even when accomplished, may not be significant or intended.

The book is divided into four main parts. In the first part, Shull lays out the conceptual framework by describing the nature of civil rights in terms of presidential influence and policy change. In the second part, Shull examines presidential policy statements and actions. This entails analysing policy statements, legislative and budget actions, but also administrative and judicial actions. The cases used describe, for example, circumstances surrounding nominations. Presidents have used budgets to further their goals in civil rights policy. Reagan and Bush in particular were assertive in budgeting compared to other presidents. There was a dramatic reduction in civil rights expenditures as a proportion of the total federal budget. Reagan's

implementation of a general anti-government, anti-regulation, and *laissez-faire* philosophy was criticized for halting progress and eroding previous gains.

In accordance with the stimulus-response model, the third part of the book focuses on the Congress and governmental agencies as well as on the courts and non-governmental actors. Case studies are used to highlight theoretical concepts such as the relationships among institutions in the political environment, presidential influence, and policy change. How, then, do legislative and executive officials view presidential statements and actions? Congress supports presidential initiatives in civil rights to a lesser extent than in most other policy areas, but is nevertheless sensitive to cues from the White House. The media often cover events of a very dramatic nature, for example the beating of Rodney King and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. This affects the attitudes of both the mass public and elite decision-makers. Interest groups play an important part when it comes to keeping decision-makers aware of continued inequalities.

The fourth part of the book sets out to evaluate presidential influence. The expectations from those outside government presumed George Bush to garner support from those outside government in support of his "kinder, gentler" civil rights policy. But Bush's statements and actions were actually more ideologically conservative than were Ronald Reagan's. The budget cuts were also more drastic under Bush.

The study shows that Bush continued and maintained the legacy from Reagan, who returned civil rights to a place of prominence on the national agenda. But in doing so he attempted to cut back on the system of federal protection. Shull claims (p. 7) that the two conservatives led the state towards substantial changes in civil rights policy: "Ronald Reagan and George Bush reversed the direction that civil rights policy had taken during the previous generation. Such a dramatic policy change revealed the president as the major catalyst for policy innovation." Presidents Reagan and Bush were exceptional in the sense that they politicized civil rights more than any of their predecessors. By making a lot of statements and taking action they pursued their policy-preferences, using their influence to change civil rights policy. Though loyal to the Reagan legacy of going public and taking strong stands on civil rights issues, Bush actually went well beyond it.

Shull acknowledges that the president often is not the driving-force behind civil rights policy, but the power of the presidency is usually essential in order to change policy. Based on this study, the author finds that Democratic presidents are generally much more supportive of civil rights in their statements and actions than are Republican presidents.

The two books make it abundantly clear that racism is indeed a very wide subject of which there is far too little scientific knowledge. They both represent important steps on the cumbersome road towards a better understanding of racism, overt and violent racism in the case of the Björge and Witte volume and institutionalized, policy-related racism in the case of the Shull volume. The book by Björge and Witte suggests that there is indeed a development towards a new and more violent kind of racism in Europe, but it is yet too early to make comparisons between this kind of racism and the "kinder, gentler racism" of the Reagan and Bush administrations as analysed by Shull.

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