Book Reviews

CLASS, RACE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.

By Jack M. Bloom.[1] Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. 1987. Pp. xi, 267. $12.50, paper; $35.00, cloth.

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Reflections on the current state of civil rights draw upon the experiences and lessons of two earlier eras. During the period from Reconstruction through the Second World War the formal legal regime under the Constitution was committed to some sort of racial equality, albeit imprecisely defined, while the social and economic regime in the South subordinated blacks to whites; this subordination was justified by explicit reference to race, and was therefore in some tension with the formal legal regime. The period from the Second World War to the early 1970s saw a transformation in the formal legal regime, with the claims of racial equality being enforced more regularly, an end to the complete subordination of blacks to whites in the South, a spread of *patterns* of racial subordination to the entire country, and the virtual disappearance of explicitly racial justifications for those patterns. For lawyers, accounts of these two periods may provide some understanding of the relation between the legal system and the broader social order. As we enter an era in which our position in the world economy is changing, we may gain some insight into the emerging politics of civil rights from reflection on its history.

Professor Jack Bloom provides a well-written synthesis of that history. Specialists are unlikely to find new information in Professor Bloom's survey, but they may well assign it in their courses as an overview of the history of the civil rights movements. Bloom writes against a background in which there are three competing accounts of the system of race relations and the law. First, there is an *elitist-ideological* account, which attributes racial subordination in the South and elsewhere to the racism of poor whites, and attributes

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the transformation of race relations in the post-war period to the increasing perception among whites of the injustice of racial subordination.

Second, there is a *class-materialist* account, according to which racial subordination resulted from the promotion by white elites of their class interests; by setting whites against blacks, the ruling class was able to deflect potential challenges to its continued domination. The system of race relations changed, according to this account, when the material conditions of the society changed; in particular, the extension of the industrial system to the South, the migration of blacks to the North to work in industry, and the concomitant transformation of the southern agricultural system made it essential for the ruling class to insist on the formally equal treatment of blacks and whites.

Finally, there is a *nationalist* account. Like the elitist account, the nationalist one attributes racial subordination to racism, and is relatively indifferent to the question of whether that racism should be attributed primarily to all whites or to white elite manipulation of poor whites. Like the materialist account, the nationalist one stresses changes in the overall social system in which racial subordination occurred. But it differs from the other accounts in insisting on the self-mobilization of the black community as the primary cause of change. The system of racial subordination changed, to the extent that it did, not because good-hearted whites independently decided that it was unjust, but because militant black protests made the unjust system too expensive.

Bloom synthesizes these three accounts. He emphasizes that the structure of the economy provided the framework within which systems of race relations operated, and that changes in that structure provided opportunities for alterations in race relations. For the first period, he stresses that the system of racial subordination served the interests of white agriculturalists in the South:

> [T]he post-Civil War South was impoverished, and that poverty imposed narrow constraints on the ways to acquire wealth. For the newly freed slaves, success could be gained only by damaging the planters' interests. The planters fought against this trend politically and adapted economically . . . . It used the framework of white supremacy, [and] fashioned the Democratic party into its own party . . . . The depression of the 1890s intensified discontent with the black-belt-run state governments, and the Populist party emerged in response. The party reached out to blacks and began to forge a coalition that enabled it to become the first real contender for power against the Democrats since Reconstruction. The black-belt elite responded to this menace by scrapping paternalism and resurrecting the specter of black domination to defeat this challenge to its power. It then proceeded to remove the threat that Populism had presented by disfranchising blacks and large numbers of whites, thereby assuring its continued power.

During the twentieth century, the growth of northern industry attracted blacks from the South, thereby strengthening their political position, particularly in the New Deal coalition. The industrialization of southern agriculture meant that extracting profits from the exploitation of blacks was less essential; profit levels could be maintained by using industrial production routines on the farm rather than by using a distinctive set of racial practices. In all this, Bloom relies heavily on existing accounts of particular events, sometimes taking sides in debates among historians. His synthesis, though, is powerfully presented.

When Bloom turns to the post-war period, his emphasis changes. Group consciousness and self-mobilization play a larger role within the changed framework of economic relations. Bloom argues that white business elites in the South formed an alliance with the newly mobilized black communities in support of desegregation, but that the residuum of the planter class, still powerful in the rural South, allied itself with poor whites, using the rhetoric of anti-communism to express opposition to changes in race relations. The black community was mobilized, in part, by the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which "set the law clearly on the side of the blacks." Throughout the second Reconstruction, Bloom argues, the black movement remained based in the black "middle class,"[3] although at times—such as the Montgomery bus boycott—it was able to draw in substantial segments of the black working class. Yet when the civil rights movement began to incorporate larger parts of the working class, and changed its political demands accordingly, its effectiveness waned.

At this point Bloom seems unwilling to face the implications of his analysis. As an activist who obviously desires more substantial transformations in class and race relations than have occurred, Bloom wishes that the movement had become *more* rather than less effective when it made class-based political demands. This wish, I believe, is connected to the way in which Bloom analyzes the 1960s. In his account of that period, Bloom softens his focus on the structural setting in which self-mobilization could operate. It was a framework within which, after self-mobilization, only a *limited* transformation of race relations was possible. The vibrancy of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s created the false impression that much more could be done. Participants in the massive

3. I should note my discomfort in using the term "middle class" to characterize this segment of the black community. I fear that the term may suggest that that segment was more securely established, in economic terms, than it really was. Bloom uses the term, however, and there does seem to be no very good alternative.

changes that did occur could not be expected to be constantly aware of the limits within which they operated, particularly because the restrictions the economy placed on a new system of race relations were so far beyond the horizon at the start of the movement that participants could reasonably believe that no such restrictions existed.

That was wrong, of course, as the dissipation of the civil rights movement in the 1980s demonstrated. Although Bloom does not address the future, and indeed sometimes seems nostalgic for the past, his analytic scheme suggests some possibilities. The movement of the 1950s and 1960s ran up against limits, according to Bloom's scheme, because the transformation of the national economy permitted only certain kinds of transformation of race relations. Today the position of the United States in the world economy is changing dramatically. No longer is it the leading engine of capitalist expansion; it is now one of several large economic powers, which must adjust its policies to take its newly equal position into account and which may someday have to adjust to a subordinate status. These structural changes, like those after World War II, may provide new opportunities for self-mobilization by the black community, and new class alliances across racial lines may become possible. Of course, as Bloom's discussion of the uses of racism by elites to deflect class-based challenges to their continued rule shows, such possibilities may not be realized. Bloom notes that the history of the civil rights movement reveals virtually every imaginable class alliance: blacks with white elites (after the end of Reconstruction in the South and between blacks and white business leaders during the second Reconstruction), blacks with the white working class (in the era of Populism), and white elites with the white working class (during the attack on Populism and in the rural South during the second Reconstruction). For Bloom, these alliances were not structurally determined, as the materialist and nationalist accounts would have it, but were "ad hoc responses to chaotic circumstances." The new structure of the world economy provides the opportunity for new ad hoc alliances.

Bloom's account does suggest one further line of thought. Self-mobilization is bound up with, and perhaps requires, some changes in consciousness. To act, the community must come to believe that action will have beneficial consequences. *Brown* assisted in the inculcation of that belief in the 1950s and 1960s. At present there does not seem to be a similar agent of consciousness-change on the horizon. Without one, it seems unlikely that an "ad hoc response" of the sort that Bloom would prefer will occur.

Bloom's synthesis of the materialist and nationalist accounts of the civil rights movement is more credible than either taken separately, and, though it may not completely rout the competing elitist-ideological account, to which Bloom devotes little attention, it does show the persuasive power of a coherent alternative account. It deserves consideration by a wide audience.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN AMERICA: ESSAYS ON THE SEPARATION OF POWERS. By Charles Hardin.[1] Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press. 1989. Pp. 236. $27.95.

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Is there something seriously wrong with the American political system? Many observers think so. Most can agree on some or all of the symptoms of the problem: the weakening of political parties, the diffusion of power within Congress, the erosion of presidential authority, the growing influence of special interests, money, and lobbyists, a burgeoning bureaucracy largely beyond executive or congressional control, political gridlock between a predominantly Republican presidency and a Democratic congress. Yet no consensus exists about the solution.[3]

Reformers fall into two distinct groups, which sharply disagree about the requisite reforms. Moderate critics defend the principle of separation of powers, the existence of three independent political institutions with separate constitutional standing. They argue against constitutional change, and wish instead to revise the "Unwritten Constitution," those customs and arrangements that enable a government of separate institutions to function, such as the internal arrangements of the Congress.[4]

Others argue, however, that the separation of powers is the root cause of America's constitutional problems. Charles Hardin is a longtime advocate of this more radical challenge to the existing system. Drawing on the analysis of constitutional scholar Charles McIlwain, Hardin argues, in this compilation of essays which summarizes his extensive work on the subject, that the separation of

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3. For a sound journalistic assessment of these problems, see H. SMITH, THE POWER GAME: HOW WASHINGTON WORKS (1987).
4. D. PRICE, AMERICA'S UNWRITTEN CONSTITUTION (1983).