

*Race, Ethnicity, and Urbanization: Selected Essays.* HOWARD N. RABINOWITZ. Columbia, MO and London: University of Missouri Press. 1994. xii, 339pp. £38.50. ISBN 0-8262-0930-0.

These 15 papers, all except the introduction already published over the past two decades in scholarly journals or essay collections, examine other historians' works, review and reconceptualize scholarship on urbanization, immigration, and southern Jewry, and – repetitiously – elaborate the evidence for Rabinowitz's well-known contention that the dominant trend in post-Civil War, southern, urban, race relations was the substitution of segregation for the exclusion of blacks from public services and accommodations. Written with Rabinowitz's customary style, wit and verve, painstakingly researched, regularly insightful, and always commonsensical, the essays reveal a masterful, but rather conventional historian (a self-described 'throwback', p.15) at his best. They thereby underline, even more strongly than would the products of lesser hands, the limitations of conventional history.

No one who is interested in Jewish-gentile relations, assimilation, or cultural pluralism should miss Rabinowitz's three provocative essays on these subjects. Why was anti-Semitism so weak in the South, compared with the northern United States? Because southern Jews were so frightened of a reaction against their tiny minority if they deviated from the regional consensus, especially on the topic of race, that they compulsively struggled to conform. Why have recent social historians over-emphasized the cultural continuity of immigrants from the old country to the new and the autonomy of each ethnic group? Because they were too concerned with overturning Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* and Stanley Elkins's *Slavery*. But readers of this journal will probably be more interested in the three essays on Reconstruction and its aftermath and the eight on Southern and national black-white relations.

Violent conflicts between African-Americans and white police during the 1960s suggested the investigation of similar topics a hundred years before. Largely by combing Southern big-city newspapers, Rabinowitz found that post-Civil War blacks often demanded the integration of police forces and, where Republicans were in power, generally got it. When African-Americans were excluded from the force, which was nearly everywhere except when Republicans ruled, they often openly and sometimes violently sought to thwart arrests or crackdowns on disorder. Although Rabinowitz avoids such generalizations, a more sociologically-oriented historian might suggest that this pattern of day-to-day resistance was characteristic of conditions of over-whelming white domination; whereas race riots by whites or blacks are more likely to take place during periods of relative racial equality, change or challenge.

Black political leaders during Reconstruction, Rabinowitz shows in an essay centring on the conciliatory Mississippi US Senator Blanche K. Bruce, the radical South Carolina Congressman Robert Brown Elliot and the pragmatic Montgomery City Councilman Holland Thompson, were neither the ignorant, penniless buffoons of the 'Birth of a Nation' caricature, nor flawless, uncomplicated heroes, nor a purely self-interested bourgeoisie that was unresponsive to the interests of the black masses. They were, instead, rather typical nineteenth-century American politicians, not much

more or less virtuous than those from other ethnic groups, who disagreed among themselves as to the best strategy for 'race men' to follow, but who were all finally doomed by the insurmountable odds facing Southern black activists in increasingly white supremacist states. The essay is a small, unpretentious gem.

The trends in race relations from the War to the end of the nineteenth century were almost mirror images in Southern and Northern cities. At first, black political, economic and even social prospects seemed more favourable in the South, where blacks formed much larger proportions of the population. But after the 1870s, race conditions and the degree of integration continued to advance in the North, while they increasingly deteriorated in the South. Offering a perceptive description, rather than even a preliminary explanation of these contradictory trends, Rabinowitz does not consider, for example, what those trends indicate about the reasons for white opinion shifts in general or about the importance of the establishment of legal frameworks in shaping patterns of race relations. Perhaps he feels uncomfortable with such questions because of his graduate training at the University of Chicago, where, he remarks in his introduction, he was taught 'an inductive approach' based on 'a need to immerse oneself in the documents', in which social scientific works were useful only to the degree that they 'helped us lay bare the past and tell our stories' and in which they were neither cited nor criticized, but kept carefully off of the narrative's stage (pp.2-3, 15). Apparently, Rabinowitz is uneasy not only with 'big, all-encompassing theories' (p.15), such as egotistical, relativistic post-structuralism, but with smaller, more tentative, but 'harder' theories, as well.

The Rabinowitz thesis on segregation has exactly the same descriptive character and it suffers from the lack of a systematic research design and from its author's unwillingness to underpin his work with explicit social scientific theories. Briefly stated, Rabinowitz believes that during Reconstruction, not at the turn of the century, as C. Vann Woodward has it in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, segregation replaced the antebellum policy of excluding blacks from public services and accommodations in the South, and that African-Americans accepted segregation as preferable to integration or at least as the best that they could get.

There are six principal problems with this interpretation, which pervades the majority of the essays in this book. First, it treats race relations as unitary, as reflecting one trend or state in all spheres – schools, public accommodations, social institutions, voting, for instance. But the kinds of social interaction that characterize different arenas differ, and trends in each arena may have diverged. Second, it has no index of practice, no systematic way to tell what was the most important trend nor how to weigh different trends in different spheres. For the 'Woodward thesis', which only claims that there was a post-Reconstruction period of fluctuation and variability, it may be sufficient to cite some instances of integration. For the Rabinowitz thesis, which claims that segregation was virtually monolithic, all the evidence must point in the same direction. Third, as Rabinowitz acknowledges, the pattern of political participation and disfranchisement does not fit his story well – black officeholding and politicking were necessarily integrated, there was a period of post-Reconstruction flux, and in most states disfranchisement was biracial and only came around the turn of the century. Fourth, the Rabinowitz thesis concentrates almost entirely on cities, yet the vast majority of Southern blacks lived in small towns or the countryside, where exclusion and segregation from many economic activities was clearly impossible. The significance for his hypothesis of contrary trends in the North is also unclear. Fifth, as defenders of segregation generally did, Rabinowitz neglects private or home-based patterns of social behaviour, where, as in rural areas, segregation was much less

important than power relationships. Cooks, maids, butlers and nurses could not be segregated within white homes without defeating the purposes of their employment. In these instances the pattern of domination was vertical, not horizontal – who was in charge, not who was allowed entry. Sixth, Rabinowitz is simply wrong to say that integration was not an important goal of the First Reconstruction, a conclusion that he comes to by ignoring debates over laws and constitutional provisions in the Congress and the state legislatures, North as well as South, during and after the 1870s, and by deciding *a priori* that the years from 1865 to 1900 could be treated as a unit, which allows him to cite evidence from any year to make his points about the prevalence of segregated practices, instead of considering the possibility that there were significant trends within the period. Challenges to the Rabinowitz thesis should seek to avoid as many of these faults as possible. At least one will.

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