

# Book Reviews

## THE NEW WORLD OF NEGRO AMERICANS

By Harold R. Isaacs. Phoenix House, London, 1964. Pp. 366. Price 42s.

This book deals primarily with the impact of modern Africa on the American Negro. It is based on extended interviews between Isaacs and 55 leaders of American Negro society, for the most part professors, college presidents, writers and leaders of racial pressure organizations. Among the better known people on the list are James Baldwin, Ralph J. Bunche, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins.

Isaacs quotes this interview material extensively, but without identifying the persons quoted. Since he evidently has excellent rapport with his subjects and uncritically accepts the ideological premises of the militant integrationists, his book can probably be accepted as a faithful rendering of the conflicting opinions, moods, attitudes, passions and resentments of American Negro leaders.

Critical readers may make the mistake of putting the book aside after reading the first 50 or so pages. These contain all the fashionable shibboleths and officially approved tropistic reactions. Thus, we learn that the "nonwhites are a majority of the world's people and will no longer tolerate white domination." What is objectionable in this statement, of course, is the implicit assumption of "nonwhite" unity. In a sense, the Caucasoids are closer to the Negroids than the Mongoloids are for the former represent biological adaptation to temperate, the second to hot and the third to cold climates. If we referred to Caucasoids as the pink race and considered that the only "white" people were albinos, this might dispel the false dichotomy between white and colored, and stimulate sensible talk about race as the product of biogenetic adaptations to specific habitats.

Mr Isaacs also seems to believe that Americans in general are "racist," by which he means intolerant of race differences. Yet the evidence is fairly clear that the dominant white, Protestant American majority has rapidly knocked down discriminatory barriers against the Chinese-Americans and Japanese-Americans despite visible racial difference. This occurred because these two (and, indeed, other) racially alien minorities conformed to the standards of U.S. society and made notable contributions to the scientific, aesthetic, academic and, for that matter, valor élites. The Negroes (and, to some extent, the Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Amerinds) have failed to measure up to these standards and accordingly have been subjected to adversely discriminatory treatment.

The discerning reader, however, should not be too much concerned about Isaacs' uncritical and stereotyped judgments on these large issues. In other areas, Isaacs is a sociologist of unusual realism and insight.

He expatiates, for example, on the fact that *black* (probably because of its connotations of night, sleep and death) connotes evil, ignorance and dirt in all cultures, including those in which Negroes are not in evidence. In this sense, color becomes a handicap for the melanoid races which it can never be for the yellowish or the ruddy ones.

Until the rise of independent African Negro states, Isaacs points out, the predominant attitude of the American Negroes toward Africa was one of rejection and disinterest. To call a Negro an African meant to call him

a naked savage, a cannibal. American Negroes generally rejected African students in American colleges and treated them with contempt. Rejection of his racial heritage and search for assimilation into white American society was part of the Negro's highly unstable ambivalence toward his hyphenated status and identity.

Herskovits, Du Bois, Woodson and others wrote inflated accounts of the cultural grandeur that trans-Saharan Africa had allegedly enjoyed in the dim past. The cannibals of Timbuktu were equated to their European contemporaries who built the cathedral at Chartres. This effort to give the Negro collective self-respect by giving him respectable roots came to fruition only when colored presidents and dictators took power in the former European colonies of Africa.

Isaacs goes into great detail about the ways in which the pellmell European retreat from colonialism has inspired a back-to-Africa movement among American Negro intellectuals, and the extreme frustrations, disappointments and heartaches that have resulted. We have Richard Wright making his pilgrimage to the Gold Coast just before the birth of Ghana and finding the Africans "evasive," "oblique," "hard-to-know," "suspicious" and "childlike." James Baldwin could not talk to them, hated their "outrageous getups," their "ignorance of how society is put together," their naiveté and their obsession with politics. "They disgusted me, I think. They thought I had money, but I didn't. . . . I couldn't really hate America the way they did."

The American Negroes in contemporary Africa undergo rapid disillusionment. They note that the same Africans who attack the white world for alleged oppression of the working classes beat their servants, feed them scraps from the table, yell at them "and even say they are not human. . . ." The American Negroes are appalled by omnipresent stupidity, incompetence, theft of public funds on a gargantuan scale, the unjustified African presumption of superiority, the fear of competition from colored Americans and the refusal by newly spawned African Negro states to consider Negro Americans acceptable ambassadors from the United States. As one unidentified Negro American in Africa put it to Isaacs, "thank God for slavery."

The feeling of superiority which the American Negro intellectual feels toward the great majority of his African counterparts may, as Isaacs believes, merely reflect the greater cultural advantages which he was able to enjoy thanks to having been enslaved. But it may also derive from the fact that the average American Negro is, according to geneticist Curt Stern, between a quarter and a third Caucasian. The Negro intellectual is typically far more Caucasoid in his genetic makeup.

NATHANIEL WEYL.

#### PRIMITIVE PRAGMATISTS: THE MODOC INDIANS OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

By Verne F. Ray. University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1963. Pp. 237, 17 line drawings, 2 maps. Price \$5.00.

This is a very revealing work on the Modoc Indians of northern California, a strongly aggressive tribe who (in association with another of the same language) made it their business to raid and prey on their weaker neighbours. Professor Ray, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Washington, has given a very clear insight into their ideas, way of life and social organisation.

What is particularly interesting is the fact that their raids were made for