

## Culture



# Donald W. ATTWOOD, *Raising Cane: The Political Economy of Sugar in Western India*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992; 366 pages

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graphic brought exotic peoples and places to North American coffee tables. Guidelines directed that "only what is of a kindly nature is printed about any country or people, everything unpleasant or unduly critical being avoided," thereby largely expunging the overtly hostile or racist portrayals that too often characterized the public displays (pp.26-27).

However, such a commitment to the avoidance of controversy resulted in a publication that has historically largely avoided images depicting poverty, colonial oppression, and racism. By assuring its readers of the advantages of modernization and the inevitable adoption of western values by "less civilized" peoples, the "*National Geographic* helped white, upwardly mobile Americans to locate themselves in a changing world, to come to terms with their whiteness and relative privilege, and to deal with anxieties about their class position, both national and international" (p.38). Portrayals of the exotic other were carefully balanced by an underlying message of the commonality of the human experience — under the skin (of whatever hue) we are more alike than different.

It is this "classic humanism" which comes under particular scrutiny and criticism by Lutz and Collins. Drawing upon the arguments of Roland Barthes in particular, the authors advocate the replacement of a "classic" with a more "progressive" humanism that, rather than postulating a core of universal human nature underneath "thin veneers of difference," instead seeks to examine "what is purported to be natural and universal" in order to discover "History," and "at last to establish Nature itself as historical" (p.61). The authors assert that the superficial "humanizing" of others is a more fallacious and potentially dangerous undertaking than "the empathetic probing of different lifeways, experiences and interests" (p.283).

This kind of "progressive" argument is problematic, I think, since in our post-Cold War world, historical arguments have been used to justify any number of atrocities ("ethnic cleansing" immediately comes to mind). As Stephen Greenblatt, in another review of this book, has pointed out (*The New Yorker*, October 11, 1993, p.120), it is often the most brutally oppressive governments that evoke history and difference by claiming that concepts of fairness and justice should be measured against regional particularities and cultural, historical, and religious differences. Perhaps in this world of increasing ethnic

divisions, there is still a place for a notion of a common humanity that transcends such distinctions.

As part of their study, Lutz and Collins asked a sample of fifty-five white adults to evaluate a collection of (uncaptioned) *Geographic* photographs. Several of the interviewees stated that the pictures made them think beyond their own little worlds, to develop a certain empathy for the people portrayed, to express a concern for their welfare. True, a lot of their comments reflect the respondents' prejudices and cultural values, but in general, their statements indicate that reading *National Geographic* makes them more aware of a larger world of which they are a part, and may even encourage them to find out more about that world and their place in it. In this respect, despite its general avoidance of controversy, its rootedness in western ideology, and its neglect of historical differences, *National Geographic* fulfills an important function for millions of culturally isolated North Americans.

Donald W. ATTWOOD, *Raising Cane: The Political Economy of Sugar in Western India*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992; 366 pages.

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Three great themes course through this book — sugar, irrigation, and economic cooperation. Sugar — "sweet malefactor" as one distinguished historian called it — summons visions of barons, big estates, slaves, world trade, geopolitics. Irrigation attracted attention long before Witfogel and long since; if you have walked along the rice irrigation systems of highland Yunnan, or the farming valleys of California, you know irrigation is fundamental to culture and economy. Cooperation haunts all economic development activists, and the unending contest of the paradigms of competition vs cooperation fills our bookshelves and cafes. It is not, however, just speculation; economic cooperation has definite consequences seen at every level of society.

Attwood skillfully weaves these three themes together in a fascinating account of an "anomaly" in the sugar world, where indigenous factors in the rocky hinterland of Bombay (hit by the recent earthquake) have made irrigation, sugar and economic cooperation the key factors in a remarkable process, leading (he says) to the edge of a transformation.

Sugar is an old crop in India: there is reference to *sarkara* in Sanskrit in 1000 BC, and this is believed to be the source of the word *shekar* in Arabic from whence the word came to European languages.

He describes large efficient cooperatives with half-a-million voting farmer-members, competing effectively with large factories managed by single-firm capitalists. Over generations these medium and small-sized farmers pursued a strategy of adopting sugar instead of other crops, trying new varieties, expanding irrigation, seeking new land on which to plant, managing more sugar mills, mobilizing new capital, and re-investing profits. He shows how new entrepreneurs appeared among old elites, how they struck complex family, caste, and regional alliances, how they responded to the intrusions of capital from Bombay and saved and mobilized their own.

Trained as an anthropologist, Attwood went first to Maharashtra in 1969. He reports that it was some time before he realized what an unusual place he was in, and how it contradicted many assumptions which were (and are) current. For twenty years he struggled with land transaction records, reconstructed climate and drought cycles, tracked caste and kinship networks, mined archives for colonial practices, interviewed elderly cooperative agents and bankers, traced cycles of migratory labour. The heart of Attwood's approach is a longitudinal study of the role of leadership and entrepreneurship within the cooperatives, to see cooperation as an arena in which competition occurs. Who were the enterprising people? what castes and communities did they come from? where did they rent/buy their land? when in their family cycles did they take their biggest risks? what was the surrounding economy like at that time?

Attwood builds on a vast and rich harvest of studies of agriculture in India, including the classical work of Scarlet Epstein on irrigated and unirrigated sugar cultivation in Mysore (*Economic Development and Social Change in South India*, Oxford University Press, 1962).

To use Attwood's words,

... the sugar industry of western India was not a creation of external forces impinging on helpless villagers. Neither was it a product of purely endogenous forces. It was the outcome of a complex interaction between East and West, internal and external forces; and the former have shown themselves to be vigorous and

creative. . . . My argument, which is likely to be unpopular, is that the rise of the commercial peasantry has been a progressive force in Maharashtra. By "progressive" I simply mean that the majority of rural people (including small farmers and landless laborers) are probably better off than they would have been otherwise (p.291-292, 298).

What makes his book important reading is that he has done a careful study of specific cooperatives in a specific place; but to conclude, he goes on to compare the Maharashtra situation with those in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. He finds there is a "revolution from the middle" which is going to make India a giant force, and cooperative organization among commercially-oriented peasants will be an essential ingredient — more than political party programs — in that revolution. So this work should have a wide readership beyond those interested in India.

Richard Munch & Neil J. Smelser (eds.), *Theory of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 410 pages.

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*Theory of Culture* regroupe des documents de travail préparés en vue d'une conférence sur la théorie de la culture qui s'est tenue du 23 au 25 juillet 1988, à Brême, en Allemagne. Jeffrey Alexander, Bernard Giesen, feu Hans Haferkamp, Richard Munch et Neil Smelser ont été les principaux organisateurs de cette troisième conférence sur les questions théoriques de la sociologie, qui a été convoquée par un groupe de spécialistes allemands et américains des sciences sociales. Par conséquent, le document donne au lecteur un aperçu des questions qui captent actuellement l'attention d'une partie importante de la sociologie allemande et américaine. Ici, les articles, de portée essentiellement théorique, traitent de la sociologie de la culture.

Nous espérons que ce document contribuera à redonner un nouvel essor à la sociologie de la culture en tant que domaine légitime de recherche et d'enseignement dans cette discipline (comme c'est le cas en communication, en anthropologie et dans de nombreux programmes interdisciplinaires). Elle jouit d'une solide tradition, ancrée comme elle l'est dans