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Title: Review "Ethnicity and Sociobiology" of *The Ethnic Phenomenon* by Pierre L. Van Den Berghe (New York: Elsevier North Holland), 1981.

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ethnicity and sociobiology

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***The Ethnic Phenomenon*. PIERRE L. VAN DEN BERGHE. New York: Elsevier North Holland, 1981. xiv + 301 pp., charts, diagrams, tables, bibliography, index. \$25.00 (cloth).**

This is a work of extraordinary breadth, richness, insight, and challenge that simultaneously makes major contributions to the comparative analysis of race and ethnic relations and to the sociobiological study of human society and behavior. Undoubtedly, since descent provides the general ideological basis for common ethnicity, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* invites reductionist analysis by sociobiologists. Sooner or later someone was sure to undertake the task; and better Pierre van den Berghe, who has steeped himself in the sociobiological literature for several years and who is one of the leading students of ethnic and race relations, than anyone else. Yet, for all its intellectual brilliance and mastery of the materials, this study leaves me unhappy for several reasons.

Within the more inclusive framework of a general theory of human sociality or association, this book combines an incisive comparative analysis of interethnic relations in all their variety with a reductionist sociobiological theory of ethnicity and, by extension, of human sociality. Human sociality is said to rest on three distinct bases: kin selection, reciprocity, and coercion.

Like other animal societies, human societies are held together by the self-interest of their individual members. This self-interest is best measured in terms of reproductive success, for it is through differential reproduction that biological evolution of all life forms takes place. Individuals, human or non-human, interact competitively or cooperatively to maximize their individual fitness. They do so in three basic ways: through kin selection, reciprocity, and coercion (p. 11).

In the author's usage, kin selection is the method by which individuals maximize their inclusive fitness or reproductive capacity; and it corresponds broadly with ethnicity. As an alternative basis of sociality, coercion is considered almost exclusively in the context of intercollective relations within or between ethnies (p. 22), nations, or states (p. 61). In coercive situations the dominant party always seeks to enhance its fitness or reproductive capacity at the expense of the dominated. When sociality rests on reciprocity, unrelated individuals cooperate to enhance each other's individual fitness in a mutually beneficial manner as, for example, in Marxist theory, when a "class *in* itself" becomes a "class *for* itself" (p. 241). Reciprocity then assumes commonality of interest and, while specifically restricted to unrelated individuals, will normally prevail between kin, as illustrated by the familiar techniques and processes of nepotism. Although in this theory classes best illustrate sociality based on reciprocity (pp. 241-244), so that "class and ethnicity seem to be *antithetical* principles of social organization" (p. 244), castes, estates, and "ethnic classes" (p. 246ff.) illustrate different forms of their combination. Accordingly, reciprocity in human

society has at least two modalities, as the cooperating individuals are or are not linked by genetic relations.

Thus, since "kin selection" and ethnicity are broadly coterminous in the present theory, and since human sociality based on alternative principles of reciprocity and power commonly involves ethnic units and relations, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* pervades human society, which cannot be understood properly without a sound grasp of its nature and implications. "Ethnicity is a special basis of sociality, irreducible to any other" (p. 239). Accordingly, since "ethnic and racial sentiments are extensions of kinship sentiments" (p. 80), ethnicity and ethnic behavior should illustrate sociobiological principles of kin selection; and, as the most pervasive basis of human sociality, ethnicity or kin selection will substantially shape human societies and determine their development by providing individuals who are all committed to maximizing their inclusive fitness or reproductive success with empirical contexts of opportunity and constraint. The reductionist implications of this sociobiological "explanation" of ethnicity for the study of human society should now be clear; it is therefore with the validity and applicability of this thesis that this review article is concerned.

Whether the biological "theorem of 'altruism,' 'kin selection,' or 'inclusive fitness'" (p. 19ff.) on which this book rests is truly indispensable for a reductionist biological theory of human society and sociality, I cannot say. According to the theorem:

Seeming altruism is, in fact, the ultimate genetic selfishness. Beneficent behavior is the product of a simple fitness calculus (presumably an unconscious one in most animals, though often partially conscious in humans) that takes two factors into account: the cost-benefit ratio of the transaction between altruist and recipient, and the coefficient of relatedness, r , between altruist and recipient. Simply put, an altruistic transaction can be expected if, and only if, the cost-benefit ratio of the transaction is smaller than the coefficient of genetic relatedness between the two actors (pp. 19-20).

Although such calculations would seem to require conscious rational choice by individuals as to whether or not to act altruistically in any given case, the quotation shows that, in van den Berghe's view, such choice is neither always fully conscious nor rational for humans or animals. It nonetheless always illustrates "the fundamental postulate of the model . . . that organisms, consciously or not, tend to behave in individually 'selfish' ways, i.e., in fitness-maximizing ways" (p. 256).

The validity and appropriateness of this sociobiological thesis for the analysis or explanation of human affairs seems highly problematic to me, after reading E. O. Wilson's (1980:55-63) account of the altruistic theorem and its implications. However, since the present work rests on the assumption that the sociobiological thesis is valid and appropriate for the analysis of human society, I can only register my rejection of that view and pass on to consider the text as an application of sociobiological theory to human societies and as a comparative analysis of ethnicity and ethnic behavior. Given the richness of the present work, it is not possible to mention, much less discuss, all or most of its excellent data and interpretations. I therefore restrict my comments to the central issue of its theoretical validity, as that is also the most important consideration it raises.

If, then, we take for granted the biological theorem of altruism and seek to explain and analyze ethnicity thereby, we can do so only insofar as ethnies (p. 22) or "ethnic groups" are populations of genetically related individuals. In that case, each ethny will share common descent and will be predominantly endogamous. Only on those conditions can the biological theorem of altruism or nepotism hold for the memberships of ethnies or ethnic groups. In the absence of such de facto inclusive genetic relatedness of its members, the sociobiological doctrine of altruism cannot hold for any ethnic unit, since its base will not be purely genetic.

Of course, it is characteristic of ethnic groups to define themselves in terms of some asserted common descent and so to prefer endogamy. However, despite such self-images

and assertions of common kinship, history, tradition, provenience, and the like, all of which provide ideological bases for their unity and political community, few ethnic groups today consist exclusively or even predominantly of individuals who are genetically related to one another. In short, an ethnic group's self-definition in terms of common descent and kinship is an ideological rather than a biological fact.

Van den Berghe clearly recognizes the relevance for his thesis of the difference between actual genetic relatedness and its assertion as an ideological postulate of ethnic community. However, he rather hedges on this question and seems to want to have the matter both ways, which is not allowable in a point so critical to his entire argument. As the issue is crucial for his theory, I cite two relevant statements at length.

It will be objected that the sense of common descent in ethnicity is often a fiction, which is true enough. But for such a fiction to be effective, it has to be credible, and this cannot be achieved instantaneously, arbitrarily and at random. It takes time before an alien group becomes assimilated into an ethny, and, as the assimilation process is accompanied by intermarriage, generations of interbreeding do indeed transform the fiction into reality again. Two previously unrelated groups can fuse into one breeding population after a couple of generations of intermarriage (pp. 242-243).

If I understand correctly, this says that while some ethnies share common descent and genetic links, others merely share the possibility of interbreeding and kinship in future generations. The biological status of these two kinds of ethny is thus radically different. While, whether valid or not, the biological theorem of altruism may apply to one kind, it surely does not apply to *all* the members of the other—that is, to any ethny whose members are merely a potential kin group. Rather, the theorem may apply only to each preferentially endogamous population within it.

Remarking on the growth in size of ethnies during the past “few thousand years,” van den Berghe also says,

Over time, ethnies grew to thousands and even millions of people, and, as they grew, their underlying kinship basis became, of course, correspondingly diluted. Nevertheless, underlying ethnicity, wherever it is found, is some notion of shared ancestry, real or at least *credibly putative*. In the absence of such a belief—however vague and generalized—the basis of sociality is *not* ethnicity but something else (p. 240).

In this latter statement, what matters in the assertion of ethnicity and the identification of ethnies is not biological relatedness but ideological postulates of common descent which at best are mere assertions of collective belief and are often consciously constructed political fictions. As Sir Henry Maine (1907[1861]:106) pointed out long ago, “The history of political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions.”

By thus equivocating and assimilating genetically heterogeneous and interrelated populations, van den Berghe destroys the basis for the sociobiological theory of ethnicity to which the book is devoted. We may illustrate this best by considering briefly the author's treatment of race and racial populations distinguished by “genetically inheritable phenotypes” (p. 29).

Despite numerous recognitions of their differences in this volume (e.g., pp. 29-31, 190, 240) and in others (van den Berghe 1978:xv; 1967:9ff.), van den Berghe here nonetheless insists on assimilating race and ethnicity as far as possible. “Ethnicity (and race as a special case thereof) are thus extensions of the principle of kinship. The basis of ethnic solidarity is nepotism” (p. 241). Some implications of this unhappy assimilation are nicely illustrated by his remarks on the American crisis of 1979-80 over the hostages in Teheran. This is presented as “a classical example of the mobilization of ethnic sentiments . . . of ethnic patriotism” during which the Iranian authorities “released black American hostages in an attempt to exacerbate racial divisions, but . . . were unsuccessful” (p. 243). Here the American people, despite their many internal divisions of race, ethnicity, religion, language, history, and region, are treated together as a single ethny and its nationalism as

"ethnic patriotism." Yet in other places van den Berghe stresses the sharp racial divisions of American society, particularly those between blacks and whites (pp. 177-184, 216, 224) which clearly preclude their genetic relatedness and integration into a single ethnic group. Why, then, is the United States of America projected as an ethnic group, when it is clearly a multiracial and polyethnic society? The answer perhaps lies in the dogmatic denial by sociobiology that altruistic sentiments and actions can occur independently of the genetic relatedness of altruists and beneficiaries. Accordingly, since recent U.S. history provides examples of such transactions between blacks and whites, it is necessary for sociobiologists to assert their genetic relatedness and membership in a common ethny. It seems to me that the result is fatal for the biological theory of ethnicity and human sociality argued in this book.

To treat race as a special case of ethnicity, and to see both as reflecting kinship sentiments (pp. xi, 80, 241), stretches the concepts of ethnicity and kinship to their ultimate limits. By no stretch of the imagination are all members of racially distinct populations genetically related, as ethnies must be in order that the biological theorem of inclusive fitness of kin selection may apply. Moreover, since few people of the same race are genetically related, populations of differing race will be even farther removed from the ideal group of consanguineal kin that sociobiologists assume for their altruistic theory to apply. If any altruistic behavior obtains between genetically unrelated individuals of the same or different race, the sociobiological theory is clearly fallacious.

There are of course many other issues in this brilliant and wide-ranging study of intergroup relations that invite comment. Space allows only one example. Evidently van den Berghe set out to reconcile the apparently opposite "primordialist" and "instrumentalist" views of ethnicity (p. 17ff.) by showing how they emphasize complementary expressions of the biological commitment of individuals to maximize their inclusive fitness or reproductive capacity by nepotism, whether consciously or not. In pursuing this argument he stresses the influence of various environmental conditions that facilitate, promote, inhibit, or modify these genetically determined tendencies (p. 235ff.), thus weakening the direct link between sociobiological theory and the explanation of human behavior.

Ethnicity can only be understood in relation to other social formations, and individual choices . . . are the outcome of these competing pressures (p. 256).

This model of ethnicity has the great advantage of resolving the apparent contradiction between the "primordialist" and the "instrumentalist" views. Ethnicity is *both* deeply ingrained because it is rooted in the biology of nepotism *and* subject to rapid fluctuations in response to environmental changes (p. 256).

Undoubtedly, some hard-line sociobiologists will find this part of his argument unacceptably revisionist and eclectic; but others of differing persuasion might equally well question the inclusive fitness and general relevance of sociobiological theory for the analysis of human ethnicity or other social patterns.

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