

Atonement Isn't Enough

A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America

By David K. Shipler
Knopf.

608 pp. \$30.00.

The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America's "Racial" Crisis

By Orlando Patterson
Civitas/Counterpoint.

233 pp. \$24.50.

Reviewed by
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"The Closest of Strangers"

WHAT ARE WE to make of the near-simultaneous publication of half a dozen books on race in America? Obviously, the ground is shifting under our feet: New immigration, rising interracial marriage, and cross-racial voting are bringing notions of race more fluid and ecumenical than any the old black-white paradigm acknowledged. Millions of young Americans have no clear racial or ethnic identity—and, like Tiger Woods, they don't regret it.

All this is little thanks to color-coding bureaucrats, corporate diversity trainers, foundation-funded ethnocentric advocates, professors of pigmentation, and others in our vast national "race industry," which tends to deny good news because it feeds off the bad—and off the moral credibility of the civil rights movement that made America acknowledge the bad. David K. Shipler's *A Country of Strangers* claims that credibility with reportorial skill and literary grace. But it winds up reinforcing pessimism and, like Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations*, demonstrates how misplaced moralism can distort experience.

In contrast, Orlando Patterson's *The Ordeal of Integration* is impatient, when not frankly disgusted, with the view of the world Shipler and the race industry

project. Patterson rebuts and derides their assumptions in language that is by turns bracing and scathing. He can be exasperating to read; even his well-taken criticisms of social science occasionally remind you of some sociologists' weakness for writing as if they were telling you how to tie your shoe. Yet he points us beyond sloughs of despond where Shipler remains mired in atonement.

Shipler has been traversing America for seven years, conversing about race with Air Force cadets, high school students, police officers, civic activists, and families of every kind while watching them interact in a medley of settings introduced—and re-introduced—throughout the book. Since he is such a prodigious chronicler of experiences, his moralism has to be powerful to drive and at the same time contain his narratives; and,



DAVID K. SHIPLER

indeed, it has taproots deep in our national past. Shipler grew up in Chatham, New Jersey—not quite Christine Todd Whitman's "horse country," but close—and attended the old, WASP, all-male Dartmouth of the early 1960s, where undergrads sat at Robert Frost's feet before striding forth to exercise their class prerogatives.

He gives those old codes an honorable twist: Graduating in 1964, on the cusp of the civil-rights and anti-war eras, he became an officer on a Navy destroyer and then joined the *New York Times*, serving as a foreign correspondent in Saigon, Moscow and Jerusalem. His book *Arab and Jew* won the Pulitzer Prize, and he has worked for such elite foundations as the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. A small part of the research for *A Coun-*

try of Strangers was begun with a grant from the Ford Foundation.

With his Old Testament beard and intense gaze, Shipler construes American racism almost as his cultural forebears construed Satan: Last December 3 he told the President's town meeting on race in Akron that if "bigotry isn't blatant now," that is only because it "has gone underground. Prejudice is a shape-shifter"; like Satan, it "lurks under the surface." Shipler has been chasing those shifting shapes, and while his professionalism makes him give "the Devil" his due whenever he thinks he has him, he is not so much "reporting" as bearing moral witness.

Noting that as a junior at Dartmouth he interviewed Martin Luther King Jr. for the campus radio station, he writes, "I can still hear the majestic timbre of his voice, the weary outrage as he told of his young daughter seeing an amusement park near Atlanta called Funland or Playland, as I recall. Again and again she asked to go, and her father tried and tried to avoid confronting her with the angry truth. Finally, he had to explain that she could not go because she was not white."

Actually, the park's name was "Funtown," a fact of no importance were it not so easy to check: King later told the story in his "Letter From Birmingham City Jail" (first published in *THE NEW LEADER* of June 24, 1964). Reporters, like historians, usually track down such details; that Shipler's memory satisfied him suggests he is tracking down Evil, not facts.

Far more problematic are the author's frequent changes of venue in his "journey along the color line." Portentously, he recites W. E. B. Du Bois' claim that the color line is "the problem of the 20th century." For those who believe its dissolution will be the next century's problem in America, Shipler's seems too packaged a tour. We are never in any one place for more than two or three of his pages. While many of the interlocutors do resurface several times, the volume is too sprawling and ambitious to let its characters or narratives cohere. Shipler's restlessness is like an itinerant preacher's, as free-floating as the evil it pursues. Some of his confrontations yield useful insights. But if he is aware that any of the people he visits are staging and sometimes recy-

cling themselves a bit for his benefit and their own, he does not make note of it.

An example is his meeting with a black-Jewish dialogue group in Teaneck, New Jersey. That New York suburb prided itself on its liberal integrationism until, in 1990, a white policeman shot and killed a black youth, setting off bitter conflicts that revealed deep tensions and long-running hypocrisies. Shipler went there originally to study the shooting's aftermath, but he diffuses Teaneck vignettes throughout the book to substantiate such general themes as racial and religious insecurities, and police-community tensions.

The pitfalls of that approach are illuminated by a more penetrating account of Teaneck and race that has never been given its due, *Color Lines: The Troubled Dreams of Racial Harmony in an American Town*. The author, Mike Kelly (not the former *New Republic* editor), has raised his family there and so writes out of deep commitment to a specific place. Lacking a similar immersion, Shipler never escapes the presumptions and postures of omniscience that come with a transient's capacity to see without quite being seen. Not surprisingly, a heroine of *A Country of Strangers* is a diversity trainer, for whose manipulative omnisciences he should not have fallen. We need moral witnesses, but *steady* witnesses who immerse themselves fatefully in emblematic situations before attempting to transcend them. Otherwise they (and their readers) can become preoccupied with their own moral rectitude.

Orlando Patterson, who will remain black for as long as there is a color line, is nevertheless a freethinker. He is brave, irreverent and not a little sardonic about race, which he believes, as do I, we should delegitimize as a trope in our public discourse. Many of his perspectives derive from an Anglophile and democratic socialist strain in his native Jamaica and in England itself, where he studied at the London School of Economics before coming to Harvard in the 1960s. It is harder to be black in America than in Jamaica or even Britain, but Patterson's relative freedom from our 300-year-old black-white embrace seems to have liberated his moral imagination.

Recognizing that an ethnic identity is unavoidable for most American blacks, he still would drop all talk of "race" and replace "black" and "white" with the labels "Afro-American" and "Euro-American." I don't think this would work. Although descendants of American slavery (unlike more recent African and even Caribbean immigrants) arguably constitute a group with a distinctive past, the white populace is too varied to be served by a label that harks back only to racism and doesn't point very much forward.

Whatever the uses of labels, Patterson rightly disdains the "racism forever" and "two nations" dystopia of liberal "determinists." He shows how these arguments lend plausibility to geneticist propositions and rails against those who would conscript them into ideological battles.



ORLANDO PATTERSON

Relentlessly he pours scorn on "progressive" journalists and academics, including fellow sociologists: "Social scientists who can only count, who cannot get through a Toni Morrison novel, who cannot tell a Langston Hughes... poem from a doggerel, and whose strait-jacketed linearity of vision blinds them to the tragic dialects of history and to the interplay of good and evil, should all get out of the business of assessing the progress of Afro-Americans, for they are the equivalent of a house painter with a computer-generated color chart trying to evaluate the progress of a Picasso."

Whether or not that sort of rhetoric leaves Patterson any closer to Picasso the reader will have to judge. But often his outbursts are good fun and richly deserved by their targets. No conservative, he combines his assaults on the race industry with provisional support for affir-

mative action and public enforcement of socially responsible corporate and other private decision-making.

One looks in vain, however, for much understanding of the importance of small businesses that have allowed many non-white groups to carve out economic niches—beachheads that provide funds and leverage to win greater economic, cultural and political gains. Liberals who embrace Patterson's calls for social justice and affirmative action may have second thoughts, too, when they realize that even his defense of the latter is designed to pry liberalism loose from race.

It is a *tactical* defense: Patterson would phase out affirmative action for women (he remains a scathing critic of feminism's indulgence of single-parent families) and nonblack minorities rather quickly, and for blacks in about 15 years. He counts affirmative action a success mainly because it has enabled blacks, so long excluded from society's subtlest disciplines, to become acculturated to larger corporate and civic realms, not because it has brought these realms more "diversity"—a fatuous notion to this eminently cosmopolitan man. He characterizes affirmative action battles as struggles for power in which ascendant non-whites might well change the institutions they come to lead. But those changes might be far less dramatic than some in the race industry hope; when people work together, "cultural" differences recede.

It takes someone like Patterson, who is not as marinated as Shipler in guilt-ridden racial reckonings, to replace the iconography of atonement with grounded optimism. Walking at night along the New England country roads of my youth, I learned that in utter darkness one sees best not by gazing intently ahead but by apprehending things out of the corner of one's eye. So it is with interracial comity at this time in our national life: The less we obsess about it, the better we approach it and find ourselves practicing it—and the more angry we are whenever racism rears its head.

Since Patterson knows this, *The Ordeal of Integration* is anything but an ordeal. Shipler's felicitous but fraught reporting seems likely to keep us *A Country of Strangers*.