

Social Distortion  
An Approach  
to Race Relations

*An Inaugural Lecture*

GIVEN IN THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF  
RHODESIA

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*An Inaugural Lecture  
given in the  
University College of Rhodesia  
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*by*

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## SOCIAL DISTORTION

### AN APPROACH TO RACE RELATIONS

#### I

THE sheer incomprehensibility of sociologists is said to be a problem for both their scientific colleagues and the lay public. It all depends, as the late Professor Joad used to say, on what you mean by incomprehensibility. From the standpoint that the words they use are not being understood, the sociologists seem to fare no worse than many other scientists. In a recent comparison between six scientific disciplines it at first appeared that the psychoanalysts were best understood, with sociology fifth on the list and experimental psychology at the end.<sup>1</sup> When an analysis of variance was done, however, there were no significant differences in word comprehension between any of these disciplines.

The form of incomprehensibility which we are to consider tonight is of a different order: it does not rest only on a failure in the use of words. The general idea of *social distortion* has been sociologically analysed under various headings from Pareto and Weber to Merton and Riesman. As far as I know, however, the whole theme has not been drawn together and applied in the field of race relations. And yet it pervades almost everything in society at large that we say and do. Certainly the sociologists are not alone in being incomprehensible in terms of their distortions of social reality.

Now before I plunge into this somewhat philosophical material, I should like briefly to acknowledge

<sup>1</sup>Cheek, F. E. and Rosenhaupt, M. 1968 Are Sociologists Incomprehensible? An Objective Study. *Amer. J. Sociol.* 73, 5, 617-627.

my debt to the past and give reasons for choosing so hazardous a topic as race relations in which to apply my analysis. In the first instance I want to pay tribute to my colleague and predecessor, Clyde Mitchell. In his inaugural lecture he pointed out that he was a social anthropologist and Professor of African Studies; but of course he is also known as a very competent sociologist. Now that the chair has become one of Sociology, I hope that the new title will be as broadly interpreted as the old. Not only is the department in practice a joint department of sociology and social anthropology; but in any case the term Sociology suitably links the disciplines in which I work. Among these I particularly include psychology, whose importance for sociology, in spite of the strictures of Durkheim<sup>2</sup> and others, I shall be stressing here.

From this it is not difficult to move into a justification for the topic of race relations. Firstly, this is *par excellence* a mixed field in which a multi-disciplinarian like myself could reasonably be expected to take an interest. Secondly, it is also a subject which has not developed a theoretical structure of its own; and an important part of my message is that sociological understanding has a special part to play in this regard. Thirdly, Central Africa is of course a focus of concern for race relations; and our department has been fortunate in securing research funds from the Round Table Chair of Race Relations attached to the College. In the circumstances, a sociological approach to race relations is surely the appropriate subject for this inaugural lecture.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. "(taking) . . . the viewpoint of those sociologists who, making sociology a science completely irreducible to psychology, consider it as necessary and sufficient for the total explanation of social reality." Durkheim, E. in *Larousse du XXe Siècle*. Paris, 1933.

## II

It seems only fair to say that for such a topic about half the time will have to be spent on the sociological approach itself. In the first place, I wish to put forward a particular philosophical position which is based on the sociology of knowledge. Again, the model of society which will be proposed is on a psychological basis, and is therefore unfamiliar enough in sociology to need a careful exposition. Finally, the methods of sociology, like those of any other science, need stating as a prelude to each investigation.

For purposes of this lecture, then, the material will be organised at three levels which in my view are those of modern sociological method. In succeeding order of penetration, these are social facts, social constructions and models, and social insight. At each level I shall try to assemble the material in such a way as to illuminate race relations, and in the end we shall approach this whole subject with the techniques which emerge from the analysis.

At the first level of social facts, there is some dispute about whether the collection of social facts alone, at a purely descriptive level and without interpretation, is part of sociology at all. In social anthropology, descriptive fact-gathering or sociography is sometimes looked upon with a certain amount of contempt but seems scientifically legitimate. In sociology, to take perhaps an extreme view, we find Peter Berger contending that there is almost no sociology at all in the famous Kinsey reports.<sup>3</sup> It might have been thought that the scientifically itemized sexual behaviour of the American male and female would have been of some sociological significance; but simple counting,

<sup>3</sup>Berger, P. L. 1963 *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. Penguin Books, reprint, p. 22.

or even correlating items that one counts, is not according to Berger sociology.

Such a view seems to rest on a much oversimplified conception of what social reality amounts to: in fact, on a set of hypotheses which might be called the Absorption or Exposure theory of reality. On this theory fact-collecting is pre-scientific merely because it is so simple. Social reality is believed to be objectively "out there", and one has only to be exposed to a social situation to absorb it "as it really is". For this purpose any competent and trained observer can report back "exactly what has happened"; and then the real work of sociological interpretation begins.

From the experience of our legal colleagues alone, the difficulty of finding even the facts of an accident from a group of "eye-witnesses" should have cast doubt on this theory; but it still remains an obdurate adaptation from the inanimate world of physical science. The problem is that social facts are not "hard" but "soft" facts: that is to say, they are coloured, distorted, even created through processes within the observer, both psychological and cultural. These lead to what can be called *fact distortion* of whatever social reality may be.

The first of these processes in fact distortion is that of "word-blocking", or for that matter "number-blocking". In western culture we have heavily over-learned to manage our environment and defend ourselves with words and numbers. These constant devices seem to have had at least four unfortunate results for social science. Firstly, the words or numbers block out an experience while it is actually happening to us. From sheer habit we have difficulty in directly experiencing without at the same time describing what is happening, to ourselves or to others. Secondly, when words or numbers are used to describe the experience afterwards, they reduce or thin it down. This is because our culture-laden vocabulary

only selects the parts of experience which seem useful to manage the environment or are culturally interesting. Even then we are verbally floundering after what has happened in a world of ever-changing meanings; or, as T. S. Eliot has so beautifully put it:

“Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, and closely connected, the words are too inaccurate to describe even that which we do perceive and retain. The reason here is that most of our words are overworked and blurred from use in too many contexts. Finally and worst of all, we can easily manipulate words and numbers so as to make the experience appear what we think it should have been, or would have liked it to have been. All this is bad enough in one's own cultural milieu; it can be highly distorting in another culture when one does not know the significance of what is being omitted.

Second in the process of fact distortion is what may be called “filtering”, a phenomenon which applies especially to the observation of human relations. To use a computer-like model of the human personality for a moment, we all go through life equipped with a defensive filter which is served by a memory bank. Through the filter are transmitted and received all communications with others, even in cases when we think that we are passive spectators. The memory bank supplies the filter with all the preconceptions, attitudes and role expectations which we have acquired and internalized over a lifetime. Fairly obviously, when two people interact, the shared communication has to go through their two

<sup>4</sup>Eliot, T. S. 1952 *East Coker. Four Quartets*, 9th impress. London, Faber & Faber, p. 21.



filters, which means that fact distortion is usually magnified. Should I meet a man with a different ethnic appearance from myself, then this stimulus might touch off certain associations from my memory bank. If the accompanying emotional tone is an unpleasant one, then I may behave unpleasantly quite irrespective of how he behaves and may read his friendly gestures as offensive. This rebuff will reinforce any unpleasant traces in his memory bank connected with my ethnic appearance; and this in turn will probably ensure his deteriorated behaviour in a similar encounter in the future. It is thus all too easy for information through any filter to follow stereotyped patterns and run irretrievably along rails which have been laid by the individual's experience and psychological make-up. The process of communication is difficult enough when the interactors have the same culture in common; it can be much more distorted in a race relations situation.

Third in the sequence of fact distortion is cultural distortion, which may be seen in two aspects: cultural selectivity and the dominant cultural climate of the time in which one operates. It would appear that all cultures select what seems to be useful or interesting from the vast variety of phenomena available in a given environment, and that the selections made are in terms of certain values. Speaking very generally, one might say that western-type cultures in this regard are purposive and competitive, or to use McClelland's term, need-achievement oriented.<sup>5</sup> Some non-western cultures, on the other hand, seem to make contemplative and permissive value choices, while still others appear paranoid in western value terms. Such contrasts imply that radically different selections of what is considered important are being

<sup>5</sup>McClelland, D. C. 1961 *The Achieving Society*. Princeton, Van Nostrand.

made from different environments by different people; so that a man bound to one culture might have great difficulty in understanding the choices of men bound to other cultures.

Of similar importance in fact distortion is the compelling quality on human thought and actions of the dominant beliefs and intellectual or emotional climate of a particular time. This applies with full force to social scientists. In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, to have been able to undertake social studies entirely uninfluenced by the evolutionary approach of Social Darwinism is difficult to imagine. In this century the British "social structure" school in social anthropology, and Talcott Parsons and his associates in sociology, have had an influence only somewhat less compelling.

To draw this argument together, then, what I am saying is that social facts are not as apparent nor as simple as they seem. Firstly, through blocks in our ability to experience, we do not perceive them as vividly as we might. Secondly, with special reference to human relations, even that which we do perceive is filtered through the elements of our accumulated experience. Thirdly, the cultural selectivity with which we operate tends to eliminate material to which we are not socially required to respond. And finally, in interpreting what we receive, we are constrained by the dominant cultural climate of our time, *or we will not be listened to.*

So far we have only considered social facts and their perception. When, however, any attempt is made to relate them together, to generalize on their occurrence or to predict from them, a whole new set of problems arises. We are now at the second level of constructions and models. Here we are moving away from the often ill-conceived social facts to the interpretation of them. In common language we are considering the *constructions* put upon the facts. Since

these have social as well as individual implications this is the area which I will call *Social Distortion*.

It will be convenient at this juncture to take an example from the satirical work of an eminent anthropologist, displaying a set of anthropological constructions to perfection. Speaking of body ritual among the NACIREMA (spell this backwards for further insight), Horace Miner has written:

“The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man’s only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony . . .”

“The focal point of the shrine (for body ritual) is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live . . .”

“Beneath the charm box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.”<sup>6</sup>

It is a terrible thing to dissect a good joke; but like all incisive parodies, this one has a powerful element of truth, and suitably illustrates my lecture so far. In the first place, notice how word-blocked Miner is in his imaginary role as the anthropologist from the out-culture. He has obviously had an overdose of the sociology of religion, and words like font, shrine, charm box and temple, which may or may not have meaning in the culture he is studying, interpose them-

<sup>6</sup>Miner, H. 1956 Body Ritual among the Nacirema. *Amer. Anthropol.*, 58, June, 503-507.

selves between him and his direct experience of the social facts. Again, he has filtered out other available information, such as medical beliefs in the society about germs and body dirt. These may be highly relevant to the use of the bathroom for ablutions rather than for ritual or magical purposes. Further, it would seem that cultural selectivity has taken place in the sense that the value accent is predominantly upon the supernatural averting of evil rather than upon the pragmatic promotion of good which may be more characteristic of the culture. Finally, the unmistakable influence of the functional school of anthropology, deriving from Malinowski's fieldwork, shows in every line of the text. For Miner this is part of the cultural climate of his time.

In terms of constructions, the anthropologist has taken a social fact-cluster which in American culture might be described as secular, and associated with the obsessive control of germs and body dirt. He has reconstructed this into a protective ritual to ward off debility and disease, which although perhaps not so wide of the mark, is enough so for American and European participants to find it amusing.

The whole question is, could this intellectual parody be characteristic of *all* scientific attempts to record, understand and analyse other cultures? I think that to this we can only return a qualified answer. For the reasons given in the whole of this lecture so far, we can easily distort social facts even when we have lived in a culture for a long time and have done everything possible to learn the language. Again, the constructions which we place on the facts as received can easily be selective and unconsciously imbued with our own culture, at least through the words which we use to describe them. Finally, when the social facts and constructions are assembled into models of the society concerned, further social distortion occurs which must now briefly be described.

Here I only wish to summarize the material, as I have written elsewhere and at length on social models.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> Briefly, the suggestion is that models are a constructed class or classes, with which the properties of corresponding classes of phenomena seen "in real life" are being compared by analogy. In plain language, as Sir Isaiah Berlin has put it: "To think is to generalize, to generalize is to compare. To think of one phenomenon or cluster of phenomena is to think in terms of its resemblances and differences with others."<sup>9</sup> The other phenomena used as a reference in models, it seems to me, are necessarily phenomena from the society of origin of the investigator. The social structure model which has dominated sociology and anthropology over the last half-century is really a western intellectual conception: it has no place in the thought of the various peoples and tribes whose behaviour it has systematized for the benefit of western observers. Even variations of it, such as the social network model in which localized social relations are represented by the strands of a net, are merely to help the outside observer visualize the situation. A member of the culture would never have planned or interpreted his relationships in such a way.

But more than this, as I have contended before,<sup>10</sup> the models we mostly work with are *idealized* models, stating the "correct" relationships which are conceived by the investigator to exist between members of a given community, and filtering out the whole range of personal variations which actually go on be-

<sup>7</sup>Reader, D. H. 1964 Models in Social Change, with special reference to Southern Africa. *Afr. Studies*, 23, 1, 11-33.

<sup>8</sup>Reader, D. H. 1969 Model and Metaphor in Social Anthropology. *Zambia* (University College of Rhodesia), 1, 1, 21-35.

<sup>9</sup>Berlin, I. 1962 Does Political Theory Still Exist? In *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (second series). Laslett, P. and Runciman, W. G. eds. Oxford, Blackwell, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup>Reader, D. H. 1969 *ibid.*, 23-24, 26.

tween them. Moreover, through the presupposition of equilibrium which is necessary to systematic models of this kind, all inconsistencies and conflicts are masked, since they would lead to the destruction of the social system model being used. However, as long as the model works for explanatory or predictive purposes *in our culture*, there seems little to be gained by probing its correspondence with an unknown social reality or in pointing out that it may make little sense to the peoples being studied.

Before we rationalize away social reality altogether at the model level, it may be said that the criteria of consistency and replicability suggest that most models have retained some reality contact, however tenuous. For example, I have fortunately been able to compare my own work among the Zulu<sup>11</sup> with that of a Zulu social anthropologist<sup>12</sup> working nearby in an area of continuous Zulu culture. While there is no doubt that we are both dealing with "the same" tribal culture, our different cultural backgrounds and personal filters have meant that the theoretical approaches, the cultural selectivity and constructions are often different in the two cases. The Zulu anthropologist, Dr. Vilakazi, has interpreted "from the inside" of the culture for western theorists; I have worked "from the outside" using western concepts for Zulu behaviour. It is difficult to say where more social distortion is to be found: in Vilakazi's theory or my ethnography. Similar distortions have no doubt occurred in other ethnological instances, but are unreported; and the reason is mainly that each model is consistent enough for western purposes.

At this stage I would have liked to feel that we had adequately shown the distortions and uncertainties

<sup>11</sup>Reader, D. H. 1966 *Zulu Tribe in Transition*. Manchester University Press.

<sup>12</sup>Vilakazi, A. 1962 *Zulu Transformations*. Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press.

of sociological investigation, and could perhaps pass on to some race relations. Indeed I wish that we could, but the most important area of social distortion remains undisclosed and must now be dealt with briefly.

From the first level of social facts and the second level of constructions and models, I speak now at the third level of ideologies and rationalizations. These are devices with which men seek to bend even social reality as they know it so as to justify their often devious conduct to themselves and to others. The sociological approach towards this phenomenon I shall call *social insight*, a special part of the sociology of knowledge which studies hidden social meanings. The rationalizations which hide these meanings may be divided into the *contrived*, those which are knowingly entered into, and the *unconscious* rationalizations. The latter, as Berger says, "very frequently . . . distort social reality in much the same way that an individual may neurotically deny, deform or reinterpret aspects of his life which are inconvenient to him."<sup>13</sup>

At this point we may borrow from the social psychology of small groups to introduce one of the most important ideas that I have to put before you tonight: the concept of the Hidden Agenda. Most significant social decision-making at all levels nowadays is done in small groups or committees. For these there is usually an announced agenda, the subject matter for which the meeting is supposed to be called. However, quite a number of the committee members have not come to discuss this at all, or if they have, only superficially. Their real concern is with other and more personal interests. Some members have a conscious but *concealed* agenda, a contrived plan which they want the group to accept while pretending

<sup>13</sup> Berger, *op. cit.*, 54.

to be working on the announced agenda. This corresponds to our contrived rationalization previously mentioned. Still others have a subconscious or *hidden* agenda, which differs from the concealed agenda in not being directly accessible to the person who is maintaining it. The characteristic of a hidden agenda is that if somebody notices it and points it out, then everybody recognizes it, but nobody saw it before.

This brings us to a first consideration of the "social personality" model of society which I should like to propound. It seemed to me when working with this material a few years ago that many of the factors in individual distortion applied also to the distortion of ideas in society. In other words the interpretation of experience by social groups seemed liable to somewhat the same distortion or even pathology as was to be seen in the individual mind. Indeed one could go further and say that in the same way as with the human personality, sets of ideas held in society do not generally form a well-integrated system so much as loosely connected clusters which are often poorly formulated. Sometimes these clusters may be related in a hierarchy of importance or value. But far more often they seem compartmentalized or hidden from one another, so that there need be no consistency between one cluster and another.

In applying this "social personality" model of ideas in the present context of race relations, we are concerned, then, not only with poorly articulated ideas but with hidden agendas. Especially in this connection would one consider the local and national ideologies of a people living in a plural society. Since I shall be dealing with hidden agendas in more detail in the second half of this lecture, only one brief example is necessary now. In his famous study of



race relations in the United States, Myrdal<sup>14</sup> set forth the Negro problem as a dilemma. There was conflict, he said, between the American Creed, in which the American acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts and, on the other hand, his various discriminatory evaluations of the rights and capacities of the Negro. In a sense this was an announced agenda, since the Creed is written into the American constitution. The *hidden* agenda was something much more self-seeking. It was brought to light twenty years later in 1964 by Silberman, as follows:

“The tragedy of race relations in the United States is that there is no American dilemma. White Americans are not torn and tortured by the conflict between their devotion to the American creed and their actual behaviour. They are upset by the current state of racial relations, to be sure. But what troubles them is not that justice is being denied but that their peace is being shattered and their business interrupted.”<sup>15</sup>

So then, with this final addition to our conceptual tools of the Hidden Agenda, I hope that in a necessarily hurried and undetailed way we have acquired the main apparatus needed to take a new look at race relations from a sociological viewpoint. Here I may say that the sociologist bold enough to investigate race relations at this level engages in what may be called *gunpowder sociology*: he presents his analysis and leaves hurriedly for another prearranged job before the whole affair blows up in his face. Perhaps that is one reason why the application of these techniques, to which I am about to turn, has been relegated to the end of this lecture.

<sup>14</sup>Myrdal, G. 1944 *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York, Harper.

<sup>15</sup>Silberman, C. E. 1964 *Crisis in Black and White*. New York, Random House.

## III

For this final sociological review of race relations, it will be convenient to do two things. First the material will be approached from the theoretical position which has been outlined: social distortion and social insight. Secondly the relevant phenomena will be considered in the same order of social reality, social constructions and models, and social insight which has formed the structure of the whole lecture.

To begin with, the field covered by race relations is unsystematic and vast. About two years ago I made a content analysis of the subject catalogue of the South African Institute of Race Relations library in Johannesburg: a well-known source library of race relations material. At that time some 2,670 books were catalogued under 1009 sub-titles. Seventy-six per cent of these sub-titles involved facts which were nearly or distantly related to race relations. A further fifteen per cent were associated with Political Science or Law, only two per cent with political comment (although this was heavily represented in the news section) and a mere seven per cent were concerned with scientific research. It is only the last category which concerns us here.

From my analysis at the first level of fact distortion, it would seem desirable that the so-called factual research in race relations should be carefully re-appraised. Certainly we can do no better than begin with the concept of Race itself. Van den Berghe<sup>16</sup> has fortunately distinguished the semantics of the situation for us with four different meanings of the term. First is physical race, involving the various forms of *homo sapiens*. Second is cultural race, used to describe a human group which shares certain cultural

<sup>16</sup>Van Den Berghe 1967 *Race and Racism*. New York, Wylie.

characteristics such as language or religion (e.g. the "French race" or the "Jewish race"). Third is a relatively unimportant meaning loosely used as a synonym for species (e.g. the "human race"). Lastly is a sense in which I quote van den Berghe in full: "a human group that defines itself and/or is defined by other groups as different from other groups by virtue of innate and immutable physical characteristics. These physical characteristics are in turn believed to be intrinsically related to moral, intellectual and other non-physical attributes or abilities." (p.9). In other words, he refers to a group which is socially differentiated on the basis of physical criteria. From this I imagine that we could define race relations as those obtaining between people who attribute different racial characteristics to one another.

It was evidently with this last sense in mind that twenty-two world famous biologists, geneticists and anthropologists from seventeen countries met under UNESCO in August 1964 and issued an agreed statement on the human *biological* aspects of race.<sup>17</sup> I cannot quote all the articles of this statement, but their import is clear. In a section on biological inferiority, for example, the experts stated that certain physical characteristics have general survival value irrespective of the environment. The differences ascribed to race do not affect these characteristics, and hence no race can be said to be biologically inferior or superior to any other.

In regard to comparative intelligence, it was said that no convincing difference has ever been demonstrated by tests between the hereditary intellectual endowments of different human groups. On the other hand ample evidence supports the influence of physical, cultural and social environments on differences in response to intelligence tests.

<sup>17</sup>Unesco 1964 *Proposals on the Biological Aspects of Race*. Moscow, Unesco publication.

Again, in the matter of interracial marriage, the scientists proposed that the biological consequences of a marriage depend only on the genetic make-up of the couple, and not on their race. No biological justification therefore exists, they said, for prohibiting intermarriage between persons of different races, or for advising against it on racial grounds.

Well, these are certainly impressive scientific statements about the *biology* of race. One might wonder at several points whether they represent positive findings or rather the negative conclusion of differences not proven. It might further be argued that since it is impossible to hold all the variables constant, the proof of significant difference in many of the comparisons is weaker than in most other major scientific areas. No doubt, however, the statements are as biologically accurate as the knowledge of our time allows.

The fact remains that these statements taken together contain a profound hidden agenda, such as the array of scientists assembled might have led one to expect. While ostensibly stating only the biology of race, they are in reality aiming to influence the sociology of race which in various parts of the world depends on totally different premises.

Speaking as a sociologist, I must say that I think this hidden agenda is foredoomed to failure, at least in the immediate future. For those whose biological and social views on race coincide, the statement provides a heartwarming scientific confirmation of what they already believe. But these are the converted to whom the UNESCO statement is preaching. They subscribe to what I call the Brotherhood of Man model of the world. There are many other people today, however, who are upholders of the "Baboon" theory—they think that the black man is of a lower order and that he will be a long time in developing. Some of these people could perhaps accept certain of

the UNESCO articles, but many of them would probably reject the findings as a whole.

Now, as Biesheuvel said some years ago, if science tells the man in the street that something is the case which his own common sense denies, then this only makes him suspicious of science.<sup>18</sup> The social reality by which men judge racial situations, especially those in which they are in a racial minority, is not composed primarily of biological facts but of social ones. And these are subject in the process of perception to all the social distortion which I have tried to bring out in this lecture. To confront the "Baboon" theorists with factual intellectual statements about biology only stiffens their resistance in the knowledge that what really counts for them is the social and emotional situation.

From biological facts let us turn to psychological facts and test the sociology of these. During the period from 1930 to 1950, American social psychology was to a large extent concerned with the measurement of attitudes. As applied to race relations, the concealed agenda behind this work was that racial behaviour was assumed to be an outward expression of these attitudes, and that if the attitudes could be changed then the behaviour would automatically change too.

Far too much of this research has subsequently become of little practical effect for the simple reason that further work has largely denied the concealed premise. It no longer appears that attitudes or stereotypes as revealed by an informant are necessarily an indicator of his overt behaviour. From the present analysis I shall not again have to labour the social distortion to be expected: a man's inability to know how he feels, his unwillingness to communicate what

<sup>18</sup> Neither Dr. Biesheuvel nor I can any longer find this quotation among his numerous publications; but he does remember that he said it (personal communication).

he knows, and so on. Here, however, there is a new distortion which we have not previously considered —the *behavioural* distortion which presses upon a man because of the social circumstances in which he has to act. As Herbert Blumer in an excellent review<sup>19</sup> has put it: "One has only to think of the extent to which, in everyday life, a normal person is required to check and restrain his dispositions, to compromise his feelings, and to force himself to undertake courses of action for which he has no liking. Attitudes enter into behaviour but do not account for the behaviour. What is needed is an understanding of how the attitude is handled by the person . . . as he takes account of the situation in which he is acting." (pp. 434-435).

Somewhat the same point has been made by Banton when he suggests that interracial behaviour may be determined by the roles the parties are playing rather than by their sentiments as individuals.<sup>20</sup> If taken to its limit, this kind of analysis can lead to some disturbing conclusions. It might be held that most people, most of the time, do not have strong feelings or convictions of their own about racial situations at all. In whatever manner they react to racial attitude questionnaires and rationalize convincing but distorted replies to satisfy the investigator, what they are really doing in practice is running with the herd. In fact they are conforming to the role-dictates of the State, the party, the neighbourhood, or any other ego-supportive group they have; simply because to conform is reinforcing and rewarding, whereas not to conform involves withdrawal of support and even social penalties.

<sup>19</sup>Blumer, H. 1958 *Research on Race Relations: United States of America. Int. Soc. Sci. Bull. X, 3, 403-447.*

<sup>20</sup>Banton, M. 1965 *Race Relations*, London, Social Science Paperbacks, 326, 331.

Such a position, extreme as it is, tends to harmonize well with some of the more significant items of policy knowledge said to have emerged from race relations research in the United States:<sup>21</sup>

1. A knowledge of the *racial feelings* held by people is no safe guarantee of how they will act in racial situations.
2. The *social demands* of a situation, particularly when supported by accepted authority figures, are effective determinants of individual action in race relations.
3. The most effective way of changing the racial feelings of individuals is to change the *racial policies* of the groups with which such individuals identify themselves.
4. The mobilization of *power groups* on behalf of a programme of racial change is more effective than a campaign of moral exhortation, a process of education, or even a programme of legislation.

From the material just examined it would seem that a more comprehensive approach than racial attitudes alone would be on the *constructions* which people put on race relations situations, and the contexts in which they use these constructions. From the beginning there would have to be a realization that much of the material would be irrational and distorted. A full acceptance would be needed too that especially in modern impersonal society the constructions placed upon human actions are tremendously important in supporting or rejecting individuals in their social roles. The fortunate and efficient persons who are socially confirmed in their roles also tend to be self-supporting in them: in fact

<sup>21</sup> Blumer, H. *ibid.*, 432-433.

they *become* the roles with which they are endowed, especially in cases of leadership. The intense internalization of role which is thus possible is superbly illustrated in the second book of Milton's "Paradise Lost". Here the tremendous figure of Beelzebub enters the debate in Hell, like some aged Chatham or Gladstone, who:

"in his rising seemed  
A pillar of state. Deep on his front engraven  
Deliberation sat and public care;  
And princely counsel in his face yet shone.  
Majestic though in ruin."

So much for the rewards of high office, of a secure elite or dominant community. But what of the discredited leader, the man who cannot fulfil his role-claims, or worse the community which is socially deprived through denial of political power and representation? Sometimes these people may also assume the social characteristics with which they are invested: seen socially as inferior, they may become socially inferior. At other times, however, they may plot for freedom, while practising the techniques of withholding of confirmation of the existing order, so ably outlined by Berger.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps, at an extreme again, we may have to face the pessimistic conclusions of the existentialist psychiatrist, Ronald Laing. In a forthcoming book called *The Politics of the Family* he claims that under the banner of mutual loyalty and concern, men become non-thinking tools of the group. All those who belong to it are considered We, and merit its protection and privileges. Those who stand outside the group are labelled Them—the Reds, the Whites, the Blacks. He calls this We-Them mysticism the ethic of the Gadarene swine, and its credo is to remain true, one

<sup>22</sup>Berger, P. L. *op cit.*, 150-156.



for all and all for one, as the in-group members plunge in brotherhood to their destruction.

To come back to Central Africa (if indeed we ever left it) we need to know here in Rhodesia what are the constructions or interpretations which are being placed upon one another by members of various racial groups in significant race relations contexts. It has seemed to us for purposes of the Round Table race relations research, that one of the most significant of these contexts is the economic one. Against a background of the actual employment potential for Africans in Rhodesia, we shall be investigating on the one hand the employer's conception of the African part in the total economy. From the other point of view we shall be interested in how Africans in the process of education conceive their roles and functions in the Rhodesian economy of the future. It is generally *assumed* that white employers place certain constructions on employing skilled Africans in Rhodesia, but these constructions and the contexts in which they apply have never been scientifically tested. Again it may be *assumed* that educated Africans have certain aspirations for their future in this country, but such assumptions have never been checked against the responses of the Africans themselves. In accordance with the argument in this lecture, we shall also be considering the social facts of cultural deprivation and their behavioural effects on Africans in the economy. Finally there will be the socio-linguistic problem of distortions of dialogue between the different races engaged in economic activity.

At this point we turn to models in race relations, on which I believe that I can be mercifully brief. The models in use so far have, of course, been importations from various social sciences working in this field: sociology, social anthropology and political science. A popular one recently, which was cited by

Professor Mitchell in his inaugural lecture,<sup>23</sup> is the plural society model. Its principal value seems to be to draw attention to what I would call the disjunctive cultural coexistence, or existence with minimal dialogue, of people of different races in the same society.

What is wanted now in race relations research seems to be a new model which is problem-oriented in other directions and would promote further hypotheses. Speaking only from the "social distortion" viewpoint which I have been advocating, I would again suggest that a *social personality* model of society, derived from social psychology, would be helpful at this stage. The model would postulate that all societies are like the average human personality, having the following characteristics:

1. receiving only a selective intake of social data which are distorted in the process of assimilation;
2. only partially able to synthesize that which is received, so that full realization of a social situation is seldom if ever achieved;
3. resorting for purposes of self-protection and avoidance of distress to massive compartmentalization of incompatible clusters of interests and ideas;
4. displaying as a result a set of mutually conflicting interests and needs, perhaps hierarchically arranged if the society is well integrated, but more likely not;
5. turning for solution to at least some of the defence mechanisms in the human mind known to psychotherapists: repression, withdrawal, denial, displacement, projection and above all rationalization;

<sup>23</sup>Mitchell, J. C. 1960 *Tribalism and the Plural Society*. Inaugural lecture. University College of Rhodesia.

6. hiding from social scrutiny a series of concealed or hidden agendas for social action in concord with the defence mechanisms in 5;
7. presenting under certain circumstances a social pathology of neurosis or even psychosis which, as in the human mind, can sometimes spontaneously remit.

All this is going further than some might agree to on a conflict model, and especially on a psychological model of society. Nor can I claim that at this stage I have at all adequately tested the model against worldwide race relations data. For the moment I can only conclude by citing a few instances in which the defence mechanisms postulated in the model may assist in the *social insight* area of race relations.

The matter of irrationality and compartmentalization in racial thought and behaviour can be seen over and over again in human society. In Southern Africa, for example, black people are sometimes said to be lazy, which is one of the reasons why they may be despised; yet at the same time stringent precautions have to be taken to prevent them from taking white men's jobs. Similarly in the 1950s in Britain, the norms thought appropriate for public relations with coloured people differed strikingly from the private opinions of a British sample, expressing their more personal sentiments.<sup>24</sup> Even in Brazil, recent work has demonstrated that a public ideology of racial equality can coexist with a private practice of discrimination. In each of these cases, society is so arranged that the contradictory propositions never confront one another.

The closely allied mechanisms of withdrawal and denial are well displayed in Banton's summary analy-

<sup>24</sup> Banton, M. *ibid.*, 376, 379.

sis of British reserve towards coloured people and other foreigners.<sup>25</sup> The avoidance of coloured people is represented as involving fears that as strangers they might not know the expectations of conduct. Above all, they would not know how to read British signals of unacceptable behaviour, conveyed and received by tacit understanding. Here I really must give the statement of a Nigerian nurse in Britain, as quoted by Banton:

“English people are most difficult to deal with even though at most times they appear quite charming. They say “yes” when they don’t mean “yes”. They are very polite, and this may mean that there are fewer quarrels, but sometimes in life it is a good thing to speak directly. However, since English people speak the same way to each other, I don’t think you can accuse them of hypocrisy: evidently they understand each other.”<sup>26</sup>

For the next social mechanism, displacement, there is probably no better example than Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, written in 1937. This sociologist paid special attention from a Freudian standpoint to the irrational elements of social behaviour. He at first overstated his case for irrationality in race conflict situations, but in a later journal article<sup>27</sup> produced a useful distinction between irrational antagonism and intelligible hostility in race prejudice. In conditions of intelligible hostility such as the competitive employment situation, the whites showed direct aggression to rival Negro workers. Where the frustrating agency derived from the white group itself, however, the white individual did not attack

<sup>25</sup> Banton, M. *ibid.*, 379.

<sup>26</sup> Banton, M. *ibid.*, 380.

<sup>27</sup>Dollard, J. 1938 Hostility and Fear in Social Life. *Social Forces*, 17, 15-26.

directly but displaced his aggression upon some scapegoat.

This phenomenon of displacement is closely connected with projection, which is best seen in racial stereotyping. Social races certainly do exhibit genuine differences: in religion, dress, family organization, and other characteristics which reflect historical, environmental and cultural influences. But it is rarely these which are chosen as characteristics for stereotyping. As the psychologist Peter Watson has recently pointed out,<sup>28</sup> the stereotypes chosen sometimes betray anxieties over personal matters among the stereotypers themselves: over ability, sex, and various other desires in which to some extent all of us share. Because these anxieties are unbearable they have to be projected onto somebody who cannot retaliate: preferably people in another group or race. Alternatively, the characteristics chosen for stereotyping show the extent to which the users fall short of their own ideals—in society, in the home, at work and so on. Thus a Jewish group can be stereotyped as mercenary, industrious and ambitious. From all this, Watson suggests that we must try and understand why and under what circumstances inaccurate and irrational opinions about racial differences need to be created and exaggerated within certain individuals.

Finally among the defence mechanisms, I have already spoken on ideologies and rationalizations, both contrived and unconscious. The concept of rationalization is important for present purposes as the justification for all hidden agendas, many of which are created for use with the defence mechanisms just outlined. When beliefs are compartmentalized, it seems that they occur in pairs: the hidden agenda and the rationalization which makes it tenable.

<sup>28</sup>Watson, P. 1968 *The Myth of Racial Incompatibility*. *Illustrated London News*, September 28, p. 22.

A possible hidden agenda could be the desire to defend one's job against coloured competition. Since this demeans one's own economic status, it needs a rationalization—and thus we have the stereotype that coloured people are lazy. In cases of British withdrawal, or reserve towards foreigners, the hidden agenda is that the resident stranger may be unpredictable, or uncontrollable. The rationalization is the brotherhood of man model and the polite fiction that the stranger is acceptable—in short, denial of withdrawal. For displacement, the hidden agenda may be that one is hostile to one's own group because it does not support one's interests; the rationalization is that one behaves aggressively towards a helpless scapegoat. And lastly in projection, the hidden agenda is that one feels inferior; the rationalization is that the out-group is inferior.

From all this you may well infer that in terms of social perception we are still in the Middle Ages. If so many interpretations are possible, you may say, and so many kinds of social distortion, how can we ever arrive at social reality, or advance in understanding, or for that matter correct our own perceptual faults? In response to this, I think that we have to make certain assumptions or utter certain articles of belief. If asked to define social reality, I should tend to reply in terms of the convergence of a sufficient number of human perspectives on a given social situation. And by "sufficient" I should mean that if there were too few, the agreed consensus on "what was happening" would be patchy and incomplete; if too many, the surplus perspectives would add little to what was already known to have happened. If this view of social reality is true, it follows that there is a consensus reality, perhaps shifting, towards which we can all strive; and it may be inferred that as we advance in evolutionary progress and are more and

more exposed to that reality, it should be more approximated towards and better understood.

Perhaps many of you who work in the field of human behaviour may wish to apply the concept of social distortion to your own specialty. Obviously, administrators have good reason to consider the notion of the hidden agenda. Historians may wonder about the validity of historical reconstructions which come to them through so many filters from the past. The critics of literature could well philosophize on their own conflicts over an author's intentions and symbolism. Even the theologians may ponder on distortions of the divine which are man-made rather than God-given. As for the politicians, the noble art of persuasion runs the whole gamut of social distortion.

Finally, I should not wish the concept of Social Distortion to be taken at too much of an extreme. Perhaps through a sheer desire to show the other side of what is usually presented, I have over-emphasized the inaccuracy of social facts, the arbitrary quality of social constructions, the idealized nature of social models and the irrationality of social defences in race relations. So be it. Certainly I would affirm, after Berger's paraphrase of Thomas the American sociologist, that "society can exist by virtue of the fact that most of the time most people's definitions of the most important situations at least coincide approximately."<sup>29</sup> But that is as far as it seems advisable to go. In race relations, whatever we think of the situation at present, it is to be hoped that mankind will one day reach the goal of brotherhood. An obstacle in the path would seem to be the vast and mutual antagonisms generated by racial misperception. For social scientists who want to help in race relations, the search for truth might first lie in the field of social distortion.

<sup>29</sup>Berger, P. L. *op. cit.*, 111.



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