

## Racial Questions: Where Has All the Fury Gone?

By David J. Garrow

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## BLACK LIVES, WHITE LIVES

*Three Decades of Race Relations in America.*

By Bob Blauner.

347 pp. Berkeley:

University of California Press. \$25.

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**T**WENTY-TWO years ago Bob Blauner, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, began interviewing scores of northern Californians, black and white, about their racial consciousness and experiences. Among black respondents in the late 1960's Mr. Blauner found "an intensifying awareness of racism" and "a new attitude toward black ethnic identity," along with "generalized anti-white attitudes among many people, particularly the youth." For blacks, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, was a watershed event, but for most white interviewees, "King's death was just not that impor-

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David J. Garrow is the author of the biography "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference."

tant." All in all, Mr. Blauner found black and white America "sharply divided" into what the 1968 Kerner Commission report on civil disorders termed "two societies . . . separate and unequal."

After devoting several years to analyzing the 10,000 pages of transcripts resulting from those 1967-69 interviews, Mr. Blauner decided to pursue an oral history rather than an analytical approach to his material and to examine the racial consciousness of 50 of his most articulate interviewees longitudinally by reinterviewing them 10 years later. Hence "Black Lives, White Lives" mostly comprises excerpts from these two rounds of interviews and is structured around not only the different perspectives of white and black respondents, but also the evolution across time of the attitudes of particular individuals.

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Mr. Blauner's method, despite the small numbers — only 28 interviewees appear in the book — and lack of geographical representation, results in a sometimes compelling series of snapshots. The respondents reflect a wide range of black and white opinion and, specifically in their 1968 excerpts, offer vivid characterizations and memorable stories.

Quite rightly, however, Mr. Blauner is most interested in the evolution that American racial attitudes — and his subjects — underwent between the late 60's and

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the late 70's. In 1978-79, he reports, "great differences in outlook still remained, with many whites believing that King's dream of a racially just society had already come to pass, while blacks were adamant that relatively little progress had been made." From his white respondents he heard "none of the blatantly racist remarks that were common in 1968"; black interviewees "reported extremely positive changes in their own lives coupled with a skeptical, even negative, assessment of the progress of black people as a group." Over all, "the 1978-79 interviews for the most part lacked the intensity and passion of the earlier ones," with people becoming "more measured in their views of life and society" as "the extreme racial consciousness of the late sixties gave way to a more moderate, more individualistic, and less political epoch."

Two themes emerge most powerfully from Mr. Blauner's volume. First is a relative turning inward that black America has undergone over the past 15 years, a development emphasized by Mr. Blauner's black respondents in 1978-79 and again in a third round of interviews in 1986. "Now they are more con-

cerned with the internal problems of the black community and are more critical of black people themselves for not having taken sufficient advantage of the opportunities that have opened up," Mr. Blauner writes. "Like other Americans in the seventies and eighties, they want a return to traditional values — family, work, responsibility," and they

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also want "to rebuild the texture of the black community, whose cohesiveness has been gravely weakened by economic depression, class division, and integration."

Mr. Blauner stresses that this growing trend should not be mistaken for political conservatism. "The idea that blacks should take responsibility for the problems of their community, rather than relying on government pro-

grams and traditional civil rights strategies ... is really Black Power redefined, without the rhetoric and confrontation." The realization that most white Americans are not much interested in the deeply rooted economic obstacles confronting many blacks accurately reflects the attitudes displayed by Mr. Blauner's white respondents in the 70's and 80's.

"Black Lives, White Lives" also leaves us with a frank and depressing characterization of how American society has evolved over the past two decades. There exists a "consensus among blacks and whites that the social fabric has deteriorated," and both races generally share "a negative appraisal of overall social change." American society, both blacks and whites agree, has become "more violent and dangerous, more individualistic — even nihilistic — and less bound by traditional values such as hard work, personal responsibility, and respect for age and authority." While racial justice in America has made tremendous strides over the past 35 years, "Black Lives, White Lives" is a rich and valuable reminder of how limited our progress has been since the late 1960's. □