

Frank Furedi **THE SILENT WAR: IMPERIALISM AND THE CHANGING PERCEPTION OF RACE**, London: Pluto Press, 1998, 282 pp., £14.99 (paper)

The changing demographics of our planet over the past century have led to a halving of the proportion of the world's population that is of European descent. Also during this period, the European colonial empires have receded, accentuating the theme of 'white' racial decline. How have whites reacted to this loss of power? This question forms the backdrop against which Frank Furedi's recent work, *The Silent War*, acquires its significance.

Furedi's writing attempts to probe the irrational subconscious of white race-thinking that he claims lay behind the theory and practice of international relations in the first half of the twentieth century. Working chronologically, he attempts to tease out the operation of a tacit consensus on pan-white solidarity held by British and American diplomats, missionaries, social scientists and journalists. This racial prism, claims Furedi, significantly structured the discourse and practice of international relations. As evidence, Furedi cites official British and American diplomatic correspondence regarding events like the defeat of Russia by Japan in 1905, and the use of native soldiers in the Anglo-Boer, First and Second World Wars. Here, clearly, there appears evidence that a degree of pan-racial solidarity existed, despite Great Power rivalries.

Furedi makes a similar effort to examine the changing thought process of British and American cultural elites on the race issue. Mining a wealth of previously untouched primary material, he attempts to demonstrate that western racial confidence began to lapse in the early twentieth century, and accelerated during and after the First World War. This prompted an initially defensive reaction, resulting in an aggressive reassertion of white supremacy in the British colonies, in the Jim Crow South, and in more restrictive immigration laws throughout Europe.

The problem here, however, is how to account for the apparent relaxation of racist attitudes among Anglo-American elites between the wars. Furedi responds by taking a neo-realist approach: these elites, he argues, did not undergo an altruistic revolution of consciousness in the face of Nazi racism, but responded as rationally as they could to a shifting balance of racial power. Internationally, the colonies were growing restless. Domestically, racial discontent among American blacks was rising. The credibility of the

Allies was also at stake: during the 1930s, anti-Nazi rhetoric rang hollow in the face of western racism. Later, during the Second World War, the Japanese used the race issue to claim the mantle of champion of the non-white peoples. Finally, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union battered the western leadership of the free world on its race relations record - gaining third world support in the process. In the face of these geopolitical challenges, the West had to respond by 'silencing' its racist discourse and practices - even as an unrepentant white solidarity and consciousness remained underneath.

It all adds up to an impressive analysis and a well-told narrative, backed up by diplomatic and newspaper correspondence, works from contemporary social science accounts, and quotations culled from missionary reports and conferences. These sources are abundant, yet have barely been exposed to the light of day. Füredi does us a great service by drawing our attention to these voluminous archives. He likewise is helpful in raising the theoretical issue of the role of race in international relations. The ultimate question, however, is whether his account rings true.

On this score, I am afraid, the answer must be a qualified 'no.' Füredi's evidence is beyond reproach, but the conclusions he draws from this evidence vastly exceeds its remit. There is little doubt that many western elites held racist views until the 1930s, and that white race-consciousness exists in the West. However, such a conclusion is not radical. What is new is to attribute significance to race within international relations, and to ascribe the liberalisation of western elite discourse to a realist racial 'accommodation.'

That liberalisation of discourse certainly took place, a development which Füredi fails to adequately chart in the pre-1930s period, and which goes back to statements on race relations issued by ecumenical Protestant leaders in the 1900s. Ecumenists on both sides of the Atlantic, no less than Liberal Progressives and many socialists (like NAACP founder William English Walling) were consistent in their demands for fair race relations before World War I. Their principal concerns could hardly be described as defensive of white interests since their main antagonists were powerful movements like the Ku Klux Klan, 100 Per Cent Americanizers and the Immigration Restriction League. Füredi fails to chart these battles within Anglo-America on the race issue, in which genuine racial liberals only slowly changed elite attitudes over the course of many decades.

Crucially, the question which Füredi never asks is how one could prove him wrong. For, as with any rational choice or realist theory, it is always possible to construct an interpretation of events that conforms to the theory. Thus any anti-racist statement might be construed as a defensive tactic, while any egalitarian action on the racial front could be interpreted instrumentally. A credible theory of this type must therefore give at least some indication of how it might be disproved. In the case of historical analysis, the use of counterfactual scenarios or future predictions would meet this criterion.

Unfortunately, Füredi gives us neither. Where he attempts to extend his theory into the present, however, its drawbacks become all too clear. Thus he not only attributes a sinister, racially-defensive motive to the relativism of Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, but also to contemporary multiculturalism. (pp. 97, 205) His criticism of relativism even extends to current theories of racism which describe this phenomenon as a universal, rather than specifically western, phenomenon. Apparently, for Füredi, Indonesian treatment of its Chinese minority, North Sudanese genocide against the Christian southerners, and Kuwaiti discrimination against South Asians cannot be subsumed under the mantle of racism. This is not only epistemologically ridiculous, but ethically dangerous.

Notwithstanding the limits of Füredi's arguments, this is a book well worth reading for its wealth of source material, contentious thesis, and well-crafted narrative.

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