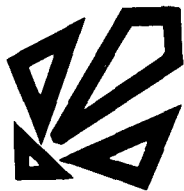


BOOK REVIEWS



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THE MIGRANT PRESENCE: AUSTRALIAN RESPONSES 1947-1977 (George Allen & Unwin, 1978) p.261 by Jean Martin

During the 1970s ethnic affairs has become something of a growth industry. Commissions, committees and working parties in specific interest areas have produced a plethora of reports, and both State and Federal Governments have made additional funds available for cultural, research and other purpose grants. There has been something of a scramble to 'get in on the act'. To what extent this activity has identified and alleviated some of the real needs of migrants or improved their potential to participate on a basis of equality with the rest of the community, is another question.

The publication of **The Migrant Presence** is therefore both important and timely. Its aims are twofold. At one level it examines the way in which institutions have responded to the presence of increasing numbers of Non-Anglo-Saxon migrants who have become part of the Australian society in post-war years. It seeks to answer the questions of how and why institutions change and the appropriateness of the institutional response.

At the second level, it focuses on the sociology of knowledge:

"... (It) is a study of the way in which knowledge about migrants and their place in Australian society has been affirmed and constructed, denied and destroyed over the past thirty years."

Professor Martin is particularly concerned with identifying the definers of the social knowledge upon which subsequent decisions and actions have been based, and whether this knowledge has been soundly constructed.

In order to answer these questions, the author examines in some detail the way in which three major institutional areas —

Education, Health and Trade Unions — have responded to migrants.

Of the three studied, Education has been the most responsive.

The definers of the 1950s and 1960s — the teachers and educational administrators — saw the significance of the increasing number of migrant children entering the schools as just one more source of strain on an already overtaxed system. Migrant children had to learn English and conform as quickly as possible; they were the problem rather than the system.

In the seventies, however, "Education has been more affected than other institutions by emerging definitions of Australia as a plural, multi-cultural or poly-ethnic society."

Professor Martin usefully documents the changing attitudes and new sources of pressure which are being exerted on the educational hierarchy. However, there has been less structural change than the activity might suggest, and educational initiatives are still (as in the past) blighted by lack of co-ordination and inadequate monitoring and evaluation of the programmes being introduced.

In the Health area, until very recently, there has been virtually no response at all to the needs of migrants.

In a review of the Australian literature since 1945 the author could locate only 118 items: none were books and few were more than article length. Over three-quarters of the articles tended to attribute migrant health problems to migrants themselves rather than to health professionals or health care institutions.

The definers of health knowledge have always been the doctors. The few recent initiatives in migrant health care, such as the introduction of the N.S.W. Health Care Interpreters, Professor Martin

Book Reviews . . .

attributes to the activities of individuals and groups other than doctors (social workers, community nurses, etc.) who have extended knowledge by drawing on their own experiences. Their interest has also led to the questioning of the ready acceptance of cultural explanations for migrant behaviour and the telescoping of class and cultural explanations of the migrant health situation.

The restructuring which has taken place is still only marginal and has made it easier for hospitals and medical practices to withstand change.

Of the three institutions examined, the Trade Unions have been the least responsive to the migrant presence — despite their increasing dependence on their migrant membership — and have contributed almost nothing to their own knowledge in the area.

Traditional union views about migrants, based upon fear of competition in the labour market, were established long ago.

Only in the early post-war years were migrants courted, when right-wing sections of the union movement sought the support of refugees from Eastern Europe in the Grouper v Communist conflict that resulted in the Labor Party split and the formation of the D.L.P. Once the split occurred, the unions (and the D.L.P.) lost interest in the migrants they had previously cultivated. They were then seen only in terms of numbers.

More recently, industrial action by migrants, the activities of a few militant left-wing definers, the creation of links between some unions and migrant groups and the emergence of activist groups such as the Ethnic Communities Councils are articulating needs and prodding

the unions. In this area, more than any other, it is the migrants themselves who have been the catalysts.

For the first 20 years of post-war immigration, institutions unanimously defined migrants as assimilable. It was asserted "... that they would neither destroy the cultural identity of Australian society nor upset the existing structure of classes and status groups." The author sees the challenge to this assimilation theory, beginning at the end of the 1960s, to be the result of a growing conflict between public knowledge and experience. Those in authority have not been the ones to take initiatives; responses have mainly been associated with specific challenges to institutional authority. The success of the challenges has been influenced by the challengers' degree of access to channels that enable them to contribute to social knowledge.

"The new definers — migrants and others — insist on ethnic rights and ethnic dignity and on ethnic pluralism as a positive, creative force, not simply a defensive reaction against insecurity and rejection."

This book is a milestone in the literature of ethnic affairs. Most previous writings have been descriptive, lacking a theoretical framework.

The Migrant Presence provides a solid foundation for directing debate into deeper and richer channels. Professor Martin's analysis is convincing on the whole, although more attention might be paid to the influence of overseas movements (e.g. struggles for independence and equal rights) upon thinking in Australia. There

are a few factual errors (e.g. the N.S.W. Labor Council has in fact taken up the offer of a grant to establish an Ethnic Affairs Unit) but these are mainly the result of the flurry of activity now taking place in certain areas. They do not affect the value of the book.

Berenice Buckley.



THE AMBIVALENCE OF ABORTION — Linda Bird Franke
261 Pages Penguin Books 1979
\$3.95 (Recommended)

In 1976, the New York Times carried a report of a woman's reflections on her recent abortion. At the age of 33, "Jane Doe" had discovered that she was pregnant and she and her husband had decided together that a fourth child would seriously disrupt their family and careers. To her surprise, "Jane" found herself beset by doubts when she arrived at the abortion clinic. She began to panic and, as she wrote, "the rhetoric, the abortion marches I'd walked in, the telegrams sent to . . . counteract the Friends of the Fetus, the Zero Population Growth buttons I'd worn, peeled away, and I was all alone with my microscopic baby". The pain and sadness passed, but she continued to be haunted by the experience, by "a very little ghost that only appears when I'm seeing something beautiful." "Of course, we have room" I cry to the ghost "of course, we do".