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**Erik Bleich**, *Race Politics in Britain and France: Ideas and Policymaking since the 1960s*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xii + 233 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl); \$23.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-521-81101-5 (cl); ISBN 0-521-00953-7 (pb).

Review by Alec G. Hargreaves, Florida State University.

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During the last few months, the pace of events in the long troubled field of ethnic relations in France has been both extraordinary and contradictory. At one and the same time President Chirac has taken a sledgehammer to crack the nut of the Islamic headscarf through a law which many consider to be discriminatory while his Interior Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, has both opposed the anti-headscarf law and broken one of the last great taboos of French republicanism by calling for a policy of positive discrimination in favor of minority ethnic groups. These developments make Erik Bleich's study of "race" policies in Britain and France both more timely and more time-sensitive.[1] The issues he discusses have moved to center stage in France in ways that seemed unthinkable scarcely a decade ago. In that sense, his book is all the more timely. Yet the pace of change has now become so rapid that significant parts of Bleich's argument are in danger of being overtaken by events.

Bleich is a highly knowledgeable observer of both the British and French approaches to "race" relations. His book is by far the most comprehensive and best documented comparative study of "race" policies in the two countries. He rightly points out that British and French anti-discrimination policies have differed in the targets which they have prioritized, the instruments they have employed, and the terms in which they have been conceived. While French legislation has until recently been driven primarily by the fight against anti-semitism, British laws have prioritized the protection of post-colonial minorities. Unlike Britain, which has developed increasingly elaborate systems of ethnic monitoring, France has thus far largely eschewed policy instruments built on racial or ethnic categories. More fundamentally still, while British policy-makers have since the 1960s recognized the pervasiveness of color-based racism and consequently the need to combat it, the policy-making community in France has until recently dismissed or minimized the significance of racism within French society.

Bleich argues that these policy differences are a consequence of contrasting "policy frames" in Britain and France. He defines policy frames as "sets of cognitive and moral maps that orient actors within a policy sphere" (p. 169). While allowing that these frames may evolve over time, the main thrust of his argument is to emphasize "a continuity of these frames across time" (p. 175). Thus interpreted, policy decisions are less a response to current events than a consequence of attitudes shaped by past experiences. Thus in Britain, which has historical connections with Anglophone countries (notably the United States) foreign to France and no equivalent of the Vichy regime to stain its past, policy makers were mainly preoccupied with combating color-based racism, beginning with the first Race Relations Act of 1965. France's 1972 law against racism was driven by a very different set of concerns. Drawing on a powerful combination of published, archival, and interview sources, Bleich shows that to a considerable degree the law was passed because the government of the day thought it was unimportant. The initiative came largely from pressure groups preoccupied with exorcising the anti-semitic attitudes which had reached their apogee during the Vichy regime. A 1971 parliamentary debate on the ratification of the United Nations Convention Against Racism enabled supporters of the bill to press their case. Judging that the proposed legislation was of little interest to public opinion in general, the government "wav[ed] the bill through to a unanimous Parliamentary vote in a gesture of symbolic politics" (p. 140). Immigration, which by this time was being fueled mainly by influxes from former colonies, especially North Africa, was almost entirely absent from the debate.

At first sight, these case studies may appear to corroborate Bleich's central argument, giving primacy to relatively enduring policy frames over the specificities of current events in determining policy choices. Yet this interpretation does not entirely fit these case studies—Bleich notes, for example, that major changes in British anti-racist legislation were introduced rapidly in response to developments in the United States—and it fits still less well with recent developments in France. As Bleich notes, since the late 1990s “French government officials have begun to turn their attention to the problems of discrimination that for decades registered only dimly on the national radar screen” (p. 199). Since 1997, policy initiatives against color-based and related forms of racism have come thick and fast from governments of both right and left. The most recent of these is a second Stasi report (issued only weeks after Stasi's anti-headscarf report)[2] recommending the establishment of a powerful anti-discrimination authority inspired in part by Britain's Commission for Racial Equality. If entrenched policy frames are as fundamental in driving the policy debate as Bleich suggests, it is difficult to understand how initiatives such as this one or the related support recently expressed by Sarkozy for a policy of positive discrimination—traditionally dismissed in public discourse as the antithesis of France's “republican” values—could emerge, for they cut across the notion that the French and British policy-making communities are locked into contrasting policy frames.

Recent and indeed earlier developments make better sense if they are viewed within an events-driven rather than an ideationally-driven framework. If initiatives against anti-semitism generated relatively little energy in Britain, this was clearly because there was no recent experience of institutionalized anti-semitism comparable to the Vichy régime in France. If the French were relatively slow to act against color-based racism, that was not simply because of the legacy of Vichy but also because of the tardiness of post-colonial migratory settlement in France compared with Britain. Large-scale migration to Britain from (ex-)colonies was already underway in the late 1940s, and it gathered speed during the 1950s and 1960s, prompting a series of laws designed to slow or halt population inflows. The first Commonwealth Immigration Act, passed in 1962, was followed by a series of Race Relations Acts (in 1965, 1968, and 1976) designed to curb discrimination against Britain's new ethnic minorities. Comparable population flows to France from (ex-) colonies did not begin until ten or fifteen years after those observed in Britain and it was more than a decade after Britain (in 1974) that France legislated to halt those flows. A similar time lag shadowing demographic changes may be observed in the politicization of immigration, marked in Britain by the emergence of Powellism in the late 1960s[3] and in France by the rise of the *Front National* some fifteen years later.

While it is true that French advocates of the “republican” model of integration have long spoken dismissively of Anglo-Saxon approaches to “race” relations, arguing that these are incompatible with France's color-blind traditions, in the years since the main period covered by Bleich's study there have been some important and accelerating changes in this sphere, carrying France very much closer to its cross-Channel neighbor. At each stage—population inflows from (ex-)colonies, the imposition of immigration controls, the emergence of racialized politics, and policy initiatives designed to curb racism against post-colonial minorities—France has typically followed Britain a decade or two later. The lag has perhaps been greater in the field of anti-racism, but pressure of events—especially flare-ups of violence in the *banlieues* among victims of racism and fears of growing ethnic separatism amongst those suffering in this way—is proving a more powerful force than ideational stubbornness. In the face of these dangers, the penny has dropped in the minds of French policy makers such as Sarkozy that to preserve social order they have to address color-based and similar forms of racism. These recent developments run counter to the expectations derived from Bleich's study. Thus, while the book presents a richly documented narrative of “race” policies in both countries, it is less convincing in the explanatory powers which it attributes to policy frames as distinct from pressure of events. The British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was once asked to identify the circumstances that might most readily force him to change policies. His oft-quoted reply—“events, dear boy, events”—has an interesting resonance today.

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## NOTES

[1] While the term “race” is commonly used in Anglophone policy debates and cannot therefore be avoided, it is sometimes wrongly understood to endow social constructs with biological or scientific credibility. As a reminder of the problematic conceptual status of “race,” it is here placed in quotation marks.

[2] The reports were the work of two separate committees chaired by former centrist minister Bernard Stasi, now *Médiateur de la République* (government ombudsman). The first committee was charged with reviewing France’s century-old laws on *laïcité*, while the second had the mission of proposing new institutional arrangements to combat discrimination.

[3] Powellism took its name from that of Conservative politician Enoch Powell, who shot to notoriety in 1968 with a speech in which he warned that Commonwealth immigration in Britain threatened to produce “rivers of blood.”

Alec G. Hargreaves  
Florida State University  
ahargrea@mailers.fsu.edu

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