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Michael Parker Banton: an appreciation of his life's work

This article is an appreciation of the contributions to ethnic and racial studies and to British sociology in general of Michael Parker Banton. It reviews his career and also his major publications, including also arguments against him made by his principal critics and his responses to these. It points out the specificity of his contributions and argues for his unique importance in defining and developing the field of ethnic and race relations in British sociology during the second half of the twentieth century and into the present century. It also mentions his many contributions to public life.

Keywords: race; ethnicity; phenotype; discrimination; police; legal definition of race

Michael Parker Banton reached his ninetieth birthday on 8 September 2016.¹ For more than sixty years he has been at the forefront of British sociology with his writings on a whole range of topics: ethnic and racial studies, with both empirical studies and theoretical contributions; legal measures for combating racial discrimination; the police; criminology; and sociological theory with a book on roles, to name only some of the areas in which he has worked. Few other sociologists have been so versatile in making significant interventions in so many diverse areas of the discipline, or with such scholarly panache and punctiliousness, or have made so many contributions to public life outside the discipline.

Michael Banton was born in Birmingham, attended King Edward's School in that city where he had specialized in classics, and did service at the end of the War and in the immediately succeeding years in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, largely engaged in minesweeping activities (Banton 2010). In 1947, initially supported by an ex-service grant, he enrolled as a student at the London School of Economics and Political Science [LSE], graduating with a BSc(Econ) degree in 1950. Banton had entered with an intention to specialize in economics but, although he formally enrolled after his first year with sociology as his special subject, one of his important early intellectual focuses was anthropology. Edward Shils, a Reader in

Sociology at LSE from 1946 to 1949, held a distinctively dismissive view of his LSE sociologist peers and advised Banton, his tutee, that he would learn more in Anthropology than in Sociology. Although Banton demurred at a full transfer to Anthropology, he took advantage of the possibility within the rules of his degree programme to take courses in the Anthropology department, at that time containing such luminaries in the subject as Edmund Leach, Raymond Firth, Lucy Mair, Audrey Richards, and a special early influence on him, Kenneth Little, who taught a course on 'racial relations and racial problems'. Banton had originally intended to pursue doctoral research at LSE but quickly transferred his registration to the University of Edinburgh, where in 1950 Little went as Reader in Social Anthropology. This stood Banton in good stead and his own first teaching post was in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, where he progressed between 1950 and 1965 from Research Assistant, then Lecturer to, later, Reader in Social Anthropology.

His first major publication (Banton 1955), derived from the doctoral thesis that he presented to the University of Edinburgh (Banton 1954), was based on fieldwork conducted between 1950 and 1952 in the West African and West Indian community settled in Stepney, East London, where he was able to combine his sociological with his anthropological training. This had begun as an intended study of so-called 'colonial stowaways' but metamorphosed into a larger study of the whole community. Perhaps surprisingly in view of Banton's later career, he confessed that, before this research, he had not been greatly interested in race relations (despite being mentored by Little), but his book was one of the earliest contributions in post-war Britain to this area of sociology, some years before Sheila Patterson's now-unhappily titled, but equally influential, study of black immigrants in Brixton (Patterson 1963). Following on earlier work in Sierra Leone by Little, Banton spent time in 1952 and 1953 on fieldwork there, which produced his next major work (Banton 1957), which combined the skills of the anthropologist ready to conduct long discussions with informants and a willingness to engage in survey research; it was an early contribution to a nascent literature on the problems of formerly tribal societies confronted by rapid Third World urbanization.

Banton continued his work on race relations with his next book, reviewing the forms and varieties of black-white relations in various British contexts and including an early study of British racial attitudes (Banton 1959), but then came the work that may perhaps be credited with the launch in the UK of the sociology of the police, a

subject to which he later attracted a number of distinguished practitioners (e.g., Reiner 1978, 1985). It also brought to the University of Bristol serving policemen enrolled as undergraduates, who were drawn there by his reputation. *The Policeman in the Community* (Banton 1964) is interesting as one of the first attempts by a British sociologist to describe the ordinary challenges of conventional police work, both in Scotland and in the United States, and in each case based on actual fieldwork. Banton had been a Visiting Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1962-63 and had been influenced by the research of James Q. Wilson on American police work, but his study also owes much to the occupational ethnography associated especially with Everett C. Hughes.

Banton's 1954 doctorate was followed by the award of a DSc in 1964 by the University of Edinburgh based in his submission of three works, his *West African City*, his *White and Coloured* and a work titled 'Studies in Inter-group Relations', the basis of his later book on roles (Banton 1965). The last was an interesting departure from Banton's previous work, establishing his credentials to be seen as able to contribute to middle-range theory. This versatility doubtless impressed the University of Bristol when in 1965 he was invited to take up its first Chair in Sociology. There for a number of years as departmental head he presided, often with considerable tact and patience, over a department whose members were not always on the easiest terms, whether with each other or sometimes, for no particular reason except that there was a head of department, with him.

Banton did later return to writing on police-related topics in two publications that he himself would probably see as amongst the more minor contributions to his overall oeuvre. *Police-Community Relations* (Banton 1973) is an eclectic collection of chapters on different subjects, though a book partly intended particularly for consumption by police trainees; it includes chapters on Britain's principal ethnic-minority groups, a social-psychological discussion of prejudice, chapters on legal and political responses to race-related issues, and chapters on police work that clearly drew on his own 1964 study. In view of his research on the police, from 1978 to 1980 Banton was a member of the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure and from his work on this arose a short study titled *Investigating Robbery* (Banton 1985a), essentially a book of case studies about how Bristol police handled individual incidents of robbery, and what lessons about detective procedure might be drawn therefrom.

From the mid-1960s, however, especially with the publication of *Race Relations* (Banton 1967), Banton's publication energies focussed increasingly on race relations and on defining the concepts and contexts of this subdiscipline. For the next forty-plus years he turned out a succession of studies devoted to defining the study of race relations as a discipline as he continually returned to these issues in response to new developments and to passing intellectual fashions. He has been scrupulous in pointing out the ambiguities in the concepts that the subject of 'race relations' employed and indeed of the term itself, sometimes chiding others directly or by implication about the looseness of their thinking, or about the deficiencies in their use of particular terms, or in their thinking about the essential theoretical focuses of the subject, or in their use of its concepts – and always done with wide-ranging and impeccable scholarship. Even so, Banton has never been above refining his own earlier views, or indeed correcting what he later came to regard as errors. Concerning his 1967 book, for example, Banton later felt that he should have been better talking about phenotype – i.e., the observable characteristics of an individual resulting from the interaction of his or her genotype with the environment – rather than race,² although one suspects that his publishers might have gently persuaded him that titling his book *Phenotype Relations* would have been something of a turn-off as regards its sales and its influence.

Of course, as will be noted, some of Banton's protagonists – albeit with critical respect – were not beyond rejoining in kind to his direct or indirect critiques, but Banton was always clear in his understanding of his subject, His approach at this time is neatly encapsulated in two passages, one in his 1967 book and the other in his 1977 book, *The Idea of Race*:

An approach to race relations from the standpoint of social science requires that race be viewed not as a biological category but has a sign by which a social category is identified (Banton 1967, 5).

Racial beliefs sometimes cause people to regard persons ascribed to a different racial category as more different than persons differentiated by class, nation, religion, or other criteria, and hostility or oppression may therefore be greater. But no one has provided good grounds for believing race relations as a class of social relations to be different in kind from the relations between other categories or groups of persons. All the features of race relations, except their label, can be found in some other class of social relations as well. This may be expressed briefly by stating that inter-racial relations are not different in kind from intra-racial relations (Banton 1977, 162).

This theoretical emphasis was clearly not universally accepted, but it could elucidate some puzzling anomalies. Indeed, the starting point of Banton's earlier 1959 book *White and Coloured* had been the varieties and paradoxes in the relations between white and black people in Britain, and this was pursued with a discussion of types of prejudice and discrimination, the concepts of 'the coloured man' held in Britain, and particular contexts where these paradoxes were played out. Groups socially defined as races by virtue of their particular signs might have any of several types of mutual relation or reciprocal contact. Perhaps as it might have been predicted from Banton's earlier interest in the micro-social subject of roles, he often illustrated the ambiguities of inter-race relations by invoking problematic examples. Discriminatory behaviour might not always be based on racist and prejudiced motives and the task of explaining the former was not the same as that of explaining the latter (Banton 1959, 18), an observation that might now be thought unexceptionable but was clearly relevant to a time when the concepts and terminology of the subject were not always clearly thought through and when the study in the UK of race relations with respect to the black population was very much in its infancy. However, even the study of the causes the different and older phenomenon of anti-Semitism in Britain as a specifically social-psychological, as opposed to historical, topic and drawing on American studies of prejudice, also dates properly only from the 1950s (Robb 1954), distinguishing it from the economic, political, religious and what were described as racial explanations of British anti-Semitism that preceded this (Parkes 1930; Simpson 1938).³ The meaning given to colour as a sign might vary according to context or to changes in personal biography. Or the supposed rigidity of the application in the United States of the 'one drop' principle might be surprisingly flexible, depending on context.

Banton's approach differed from that of some contemporaries writing on similar subjects and brought him into the critical firing line of other writers. There was a long-running – indeed, still-running (Banton 2015c) – debate with John Rex, whose basic view Banton disputed for its tendency to transpose race relations into a form of radical Weberianism and to recast them as a variety of class relations. Rex's notion of housing classes, developed in the book by him and Moore (Rex and Moore 1967), as analysable as a hierarchy of social and economic cachet and of desirability, with particular ethnic groups found disproportionately on particular levels of this hierarchy, would have ignored the contextual element of race relations because of its

top-down macro-theoretical perspective, although Banton (2015b), while accepting the importance of the book, has further criticized it for its alleged inadequacy in understanding the economics of the housing market. Rex took his argument further in his 1979 book with Tomlinson (Rex and Tomlinson 1979), where the notion of underclass was attached to particular ethnic groups. Rex recognized that racist beliefs had a fictional purpose that he thought were related to the perpetuation of capitalism but he objected to the depiction of his views alleged by Banton that all such approaches to the subject were Marxist (Rex 1983, 6).

However, though there had earlier been a few incidental preliminary skirmishes, the debate with Rex began to be more widely and publicly recognized only when, in his 1973 book, Rex commented critically on Banton's 1967 *Race Relations* and on an address given by Banton to the 1969 Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association that was later printed as an article in the weekly periodical *New Society* (Banton 1969).⁴ Banton had argued strongly in the latter for a strict definition of racism as specifically a doctrine of racial superiority and inferiority, supporting his case with a critical review of much previous related literature. He also disputed, in passing, that Enoch Powell and his supporters were on that definition racist, and nor was Peter Griffiths, who had run a notorious election campaign to win the Smethwick constituency in the 1964 General Election. The article had not mentioned Rex, but he responded in his 1973 book, both in the text (Rex 1973, 172–173) and also by reprinting as an appendix the long letter related to this that he had addressed to Banton (223–229). Rex also made a few somewhat churlish remarks about what Banton's SSRC Research Unit at Bristol might be doing, though one suspects the bitterness of sour grapes in those comments. Later, in 2005 Banton (2005a, 469), having long since resiled from his approach embodied in *Race Relations*, agreed that some of Rex's criticism, especially of this book, was justified. However, by 1977 the debate had rather developed into something of a stalemate of point-scoring in which Banton included his own account of it (Banton 1977, 160). As at least one conciliating voice has declared (Stone 2015), it is perhaps sensible to recognize the contributions of both perspectives.

On the overall theoretical stance to be taken to the subject, Banton, from his micro-sociological stance, was never going to be persuaded by Rex, a sociologist who analysed in terms of overall structures and to whom individual departures from the perceived norm were insufficient to reject his basic paradigm. Banton's attention to

detail is legendary and perhaps led to his focus on the micro-social, whereas such an attention was not something that one particularly associates with Rex, whatever his other characteristics. However, this whole issue was perhaps something of a distraction in the 1977 book, whose real merit was a critical review of principal racist theorists such as Count Gobineau and Charles Kingsley, with mentions to a large *galère* of relevant others (including Abraham Lincoln, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Baron de Cuvier, etc.) and that also included Banton's account of race as discussed by some of the main figures of early-twentieth-century American sociology. It was actually as early as his 1967 book that Banton began in some depth his study of the development of racial thought and of the etymological and biological career of racial definition, though in 1972 he allowed himself (Banton 1972) something of a diversion with a summary work intended especially for students on the general status of the findings of ethnic and racial studies at that time, though the book did contain an analysis of the failure of the anti-discrimination organization, Campaign Against Racial Discrimination [CARD] (esp. 20–40).

Rex was not Banton's only significant protagonist. In 1982 Robert Miles published *Racism and Migrant Labour*, in which he criticized Rex for his reification of 'the race relations problematic' but, whilst more sympathetic to Banton because of a respect for the latter's historical analysis of how race relations and concepts of race had developed as a recognized subject, he none the less accused Banton – based on his later-1970s writings – of an insufficient distancing from the concept. This was despite Banton's clear rejection of the specificity of race relations.

Yet, because Banton comes close to articulating a critique of this problematic (because he is aware of both the historical genesis of what he describes as the idea of 'race' and of the error that is perpetrated by attempting to distinguish 'races' as real, biologically defined groups), the contradictions entailed in nevertheless maintaining an analysis which accepts and gives validity to the objective existence of 'race relations' are nowhere more clear. In other words, having begun to expose the contradictions, yet being unwilling or unable to analyse them through to their logical conclusion, Banton reproduces them in utmost clarity (Miles 1982, 39–40).

To a pragmatist such as me, this seemed at the time, and still does, an unnecessarily harsh stricture against Banton. Whatever the semantic niceties of the terminology or even the theoretical disputes about definitions, there were a lot of researchers (including Miles) who were pursuing research in what was a commonly recognized

subject area. Whereas there was indeed a clear theoretical difference between Rex and Banton, that between Banton and Miles was, though real and despite the latter's espousal of a neo-Marxism that would not have been to Banton's taste, exaggerated by Miles, who conceded the important definitional point about the subject that Banton was making.

Miles' 1993 book, intriguingly dedicated to both Banton and Colette Guillaumin (hardly two birds of the same intellectual feather), none the less returned to the fray, though also modifying its critique with a concession of a partial seeing of the true light on Banton's part:

There has been another response to my critique of the 'race relations' paradigm: one of its original architects, Michael Banton, has defended its continued use. This defence substantiates my original objections. Banton notes that 'racial relations' are 'identified by the subjective meaning attached to differences' in order to distance his conception from one which treats such relations as being between really existing biological 'races'. Nevertheless, ambiguity arises from the proposal that the subject matter of the 'race relations' problematic should be 'an examination of the changing significance of colour, descent, national and ethnic origins as well as race, and as one set among the many kinds of grounds on which people draw distinctions' (Miles 1993, 5).

Miles was criticizing Banton for his earlier attempt (Banton 1991a) to define the problematic in the manner in which it was being increasingly developed by the law, in particular, how the law was moving to determine which groups were specifically protected by legislation against racial discrimination. Whatever may be the semantic niceties of Miles' critique of Banton's approach, one cannot help but think that those who benefited from the protection of such legislation would have preferred Banton's approach and were little likely to be worried by any specific merits in Miles' argument against Banton, let alone its validity.

Banton has always been ready to recognize the influence of those who mentored him or particularly influenced his thinking – whether Max Gluckman, Raymond Firth, Kenneth Little, Karl Popper or others – and he has always been willing to revisit his earlier views and works. In 1988, for example, he had published an interesting work on racial consciousness, so titled (Banton 1988), whose basic premise had been to set out how human beings came to think of themselves and others as belonging to races and to analyse some of the consequences of such self- and other-classification. Then Banton later revisited the subject with a second edition of this

work, whose title now included the word 'ethnic' (Banton 1997). To some, the year 1989 might have seemed the end of history but for students of race and ethnicity it presaged a very dark decade, with conflicts having ethnic dimensions in a number of world locations and with events in ex-Yugoslavia and in Rwanda that came to be classified unambiguously as ethnic genocides. The former government of Yugoslavia, whatever its faults may have been, had none the less managed to mitigate the salience of the country's ethnic and religious divisions. Banton's analysis of these difficult questions was typical of his theoretical approach. Noting that, in earlier periods, different ethnic groups had cohabited amicably enough, he argued that ethnic differences were not the cause of conflict but were exacerbated by a conflict once it was defined by lines of ethnic division. Thus, conflicts as such were potentially manageable by political intervention or negotiation, despite any concomitant ethnic division, since ethnic mobilization is a contingent phenomenon.

This issue became something of a focus during Banton's work on international bodies but, back in the late 1970s, after his earlier work on theories of race, Banton had been attracted to rational choice theory, as exemplified particularly in the work of the American economist Gary S. Becker, and how it might be profitably used to explain racial and ethnic relations. His formulated theory, again consistent with his micro-social perspectives but also allowing self- and other- definitions of groups, argued that: physical and cultural differences created groups and categories by the processes of inclusion and exclusion; ethnic groups are formed for inclusive purposes but racial categories for exclusive ones; the interaction of groups affects their boundaries according to their specific competitive relations; and contact between individuals tends to weaken these boundaries, whereas when between groups it reinforces them (Banton 1983, 104). Banton (1979b) had included a rational choice perspective in his claim to minimize the role of discrimination in affecting housing allocation, but the 1983 book was Banton's major work of the early 1980s period, and parts of it anticipate his later focus on the legal approach to combating racial discrimination, especially how such discrimination operated in the housing and labour markets (Banton 1983, 336–389). His 1985 book (Banton 1985b), *Promoting Racial Harmony*, is principally a defence of what he is pleased to call, without significant irony or embarrassment, the 'race relations industry' against charges that it had been self-serving or ineffective in producing the said harmony; a chapter of this book is devoted to rational-choice issues in achieving this goal (12–28), but the major

contribution of the work is its analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of ethnic mobilization (49-68).

As Banton approached retirement from his professorship at Bristol, from which he left as Emeritus in 1992, he was increasingly drawn to the legal side of his subject, as exemplified in the cited 1991 article. From 1986 to 2001 he was a member of the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination [CERD], an experience that led to a number of publications. Banton (1990, 1991b) gave a brief account of the subject and associated issues but his foremost output was *International Action against Racial Discrimination* (Banton 1996). The experience also led to a shorter and more specific work defining discrimination and addressing its implications, largely from a legal perspective, and written for the Open University Press's Concepts in the Social Sciences series (Banton 1994). The same issues were returned to in Banton (2002), again based on his United Nations experience but covering discussions of some individual countries and also, in its final chapter, reprising some of his earlier disagreements with Rex and Miles.

As Banton moved towards his ninth decade, his output and his keenness to proselytize showed no sign of diminution. He continued to write and Banton (2001), for example, returns to some of its author's favourite earlier themes in demanding an attention to the specificity of language use in approaching the subject, digesting and developing the scientific studies of the past but transcending them for later contexts. Never one to follow the flow of mainstream fashion or to shy away from entanglement in an intellectual set-to, Banton (2003a) was chiding the discipline for allowing scientific rigour to be sacrificed to narrow political perspectives and so correspondingly reducing the scope of teaching of the subject.⁵ During this period Banton was increasingly defending his conception of the subject, and trenchantly opposing the alleged sloppy thinking of some contemporary orthodoxies and so of some of the new intellectual kids on the block, as he did in two articles (Banton 2005a, 2005b). In these he took on those professing, or influenced by, cultural theory for their rejection of the relevance, even reality, of previous research knowledge.

In his eighty-ninth year there has been no decrease in Banton's output, as the fact that 2015 in the References has four alphabetized entries shows (and there may well be more). What he claims as *What We Now Know about Race and Ethnicity* (Banton 2015d) summarizes his views and research claims and there can be little doubt as to the continuing energy of its author.

Banton has attracted many honours. In 1981 he was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, he is a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and was its President in 1988 and 1989 and in 2013 was awarded its Lucy Mair Medal. In 2000 he was given an honorary doctorate of philosophy by the University of Stockholm. He has had visiting appointments in a number of institutions, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1962-63 as earlier noted, Wayne State University in Detroit in 1971, Australian National University in 1981 and Duke University in North Carolina in 1982. As well as writing academic sociology, Banton was also active in a number of other roles. He was the first editor of *Sociology* from 1966, the year before its first issue, to 1969. He was first Director of the Social Science Research Council's Research Unit on Ethnic Relations from 1970 to 1977, when it was based at the University of Bristol. While at Bristol, he was for thirty years a Justice of the Peace and a member of the South-West Regional Hospital Board. Among many international duties, from 1963 to 1966 and from 1980 to 1985 he was a member of the UK's National Commission for UNESCO and, as already noted, of the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. These are merely a sample of his activities outside academic sociology and there can be few in the discipline who have so actively combined both academic productivity and public duty.

Banton may have been outspokenly unhappy about some of the intellectual and theoretical paths taken in recent years by ethnic and racial studies and by British sociology in general, and his specific view of each may not have universally prevailed, but his own work has nonetheless been enormously influential; and his own intellectual legacy is firmly secured. Perhaps one can say that he has thrived on intellectual controversy, which has enabled him to refine and extend his views of the subject. Those who know and respect him will expect that there may yet be more contributions to come from his pen.

Notes

1. In 2006 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* published an appreciation of Banton's oeuvre on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. This was written by Rohit Barot

(2006), my former colleague at Bristol. I have deliberately not reread his article in any detail before preparing my own appreciation and it may be interesting to compare each with the other.

2. Banton (1979a) introduced the concept of phenotypical variation, and the emphasis on phenotype was put more specifically on numerous later occasions (e.g., Banton 2005a, 2015a).

3. It is perhaps suggestive of the slowness of social sciences in the UK to engage with the phenomenon that the only books of which I am aware that were produced during the 1930s by British authors about contemporary British anti-Semitism were written and published under Christian auspices.

4. Although only a weekly ‘popular’ social science periodical, this was an important and widely read publication in the days before no article was considered worth attention unless multiply peer-reviewed for some little-read academic journal.

5. This article was published with a range of responses, to which Banton then rejoined (Banton 2003b), at one point pointedly lamenting that, “as some recent articles in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* have illustrated, not all those presently teaching in sociology departments wish sociology to develop as a social science” (550) – the criticism to which he later trenchantly returned. One is tempted to respond with an “Ouch”!

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No sociologist was harmed in the making of this article.

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