



## The International Politics of Race

**Banton, Michael.**

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In *The International Politics of Race* sociologist Michael Banton argues that the UN focus on discrimination as a function of racial difference is a misdirection of its efforts. Not only does this definition of discrimination provide narrow parameters in which the UN can address discrimination in member nations it unwittingly propagates the same logic of racial difference that it seeks to eradicate. Banton proposes that the UN preface its anti-discrimination efforts in the more inclusive discourse of human rights to be backed by an international court whose rulings a reinforced Security Council would uphold. Banton provides support for his position with analysis of UN policy, examination of notable discrimination cases brought to the UN, and socio-cultural sketches detailing three UN member nations' histories with issues of race and discrimination.

Addressing race discrimination became a political imperative for the UN in the wake of World War II genocide and xenophobia prompting the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While this declaration and subsequent UN resolutions suggest the international community's benevolence for the dispossessed, Banton is not assuaged for he instead sees political implications behind such actions. Banton adeptly cites Israeli Zionism, the UK's wavering commitment to anti-apartheid, a definition of colonialism that exempted the Soviets, and hawkish US military policy in the Middle East as cases that demonstrate ineffectual nature and selective application of the UN's rights policies. Indeed the UN's focus on racial discrimination, Banton explains, is the result of the political climate of the 1960's when member nations enthusiastically supported UN action against racial discrimination because it distracted attention from other discriminations that if addressed would have compromised nations' foreign policies. Banton notes that agreement on the declaration was facilitated by members' realization that curtailing their own rights also meant that they were curtailing another's.

Establishing that the anti-discrimination work of the UN is premised on a narrow definition of racial difference Banton demonstrates through the examples of Australia, the United States, and Britain that race (and) discrimination are perceived differently across cultures. Banton notes that UN policy, like any text, is a living document that is subject to the socioeconomic, historical, and cultural contexts in which it is enacted. I believe that the point of these socio-cultural studies is twofold. In one sense they show how *race* can have highly contested meanings thus the term must be understood in context and history in which it is deployed. In addition, these detailed culture studies support Banton's argument that the UN's policings of racial discrimination are misdirected because they are premised on a term (discrimination) on which there is not universal agreement.

Focusing on a narrow definition of discrimination can be politically expedient and allow nations to save face on the international stage but it hinders progress on protections against class, gender, and sexuality based oppression. Omissions, Banton argues, if recognized could provide the groundwork for a declaration of rights could begin to approach the entirety of human oppression. Collective action is his theoretical lens for overcoming the shortcomings of the existing frameworks, for he reasons, that only by bringing human rights interest groups together can we see the totality of experience that must be included in future UN policy. This coming together under a theory of collective action provides the opportunity that competing interest groups will accommodate each other because it could facilitate greater protections for themselves. Banton's reasoning here seems valid as he previously established how agreement on the Universal Declaration and other UN treaties could be seen to be the result of collective action at work. The merit of globalism, Banton notes, is to allow us to see beyond racial categories in favor of a uni-category of human rights applicable to all. Having overcome the shortcomings of race language with a human rights approach to anti-discrimination founded in collective action Banton hinges the successful execution of such an approach on UN reform. Specifically, he cites the need to strengthen the Security Council so that it could enforce anti-discrimination measures under this new approach.

In sum, Banton supports his position that the ineffectiveness of current UN anti-discrimination efforts can be traced both to the inadequacies of the construct of *race* to define the problem and to the inability of the UN to unilaterally enforce its obligations. By defining the problem to be interrelatedly political and socio-linguistic I see a particular interest for this book among scholarly readers in cultural studies and race. However I feel that such readers would find the human rights based solution that Banton provides to be less successful, though admirable, because it is not sufficiently problematized. His all-encompassing category of human rights seems slightly utopian by virtue of the book's lack of consideration of how the rhetoric of human rights can and has been used to support exclusionary definitions of humanity. Perhaps Banton is erring on the side of optimism in hopes that the reader will recognize that his solution is dependent upon significant reform within the international political community.