What caused the coup in Fiji on 14 May 1987? In the last five years, a dozen books and monographs published all over the world, and countless numbers of scholarly and popular articles have attempted to solve this puzzle, but as the three books reviewed here show, the debate continues. We can be reasonably sure that, because of its importance in contemporary Fijian and Pacific Islands history, the coup will continue to provoke debate and stir controversy for many years to come.

The various explanations for the coup can be placed into two broad categories. In one of them the event is viewed in essentially ethnic terms, as a clash between indigenous Fijians and Fiji Indians descended from indentured laborers brought to the islands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The other emphasizes nonracial class, individual, and regional interests within indigenous Fijian society as the principal factors precipitating the coup. Race at one end of the explanatory coup, then, and class at the other.

Asesela Ravuvu, a Fijian academic at the University of the South Pacific and a prominent player in indigenous politics since 1987, argues from the first viewpoint. Interestingly, his book has the endorsement of the Fijian establishment in the form of a foreword by Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, the president of the Republic of Fiji, who recommends it warmly as reflecting "in the main, the Fijian viewpoint" (vii). Ravuvu's thesis is clearly stated at the outset: "Control of one's destiny and the maintenance of one's identity have always been a central focus for Fijians and they still are the central elements in the Fijian political struggles" (1). The Fijians' problems, he suggests, have been caused by Indians who "have trodden very sacred ground and have been very insensitive and indifferent to Fijian feelings and to Fijian aspirations to become masters of their own country" (58). No matter that they have lived in the country for more than a century, the Indians are vulagis 'foreign guests' who should know their place and gratefully accept a subordinate position in affairs of state.

The coup, then, was nothing more and nothing less than a united Fijian uprising against the descendants of an immigrant community. In Ravuvu's account, Fiji Indians are the chief villains of the piece. The hero is Ratu Mara, "an enlightened paramount chief with liberal views" (84), "motivated by a genuine desire to promote harmony and multiracialism, being consistently rebuffed by the majority of
the Indian voters" (91). Fiji is back on the path of recovery and reform, we are told, and any suggestion to the contrary is the work of mischief-making Labour supporters.

Such simplistic us-versus-them analysis does grave injustice to the complex history of contemporary Fiji. This is a pity because elsewhere, Ravuvu has given sensitive, insightful accounts of the dilemmas facing the Fijian people, dilemmas caused not by the incursions of other ethnic groups but by the processes of social and economic change over the last few decades. It is also unfortunate that Ravuvu has made no attempt to deal with issues and interpretations in the coup literature published long before his own book. Not a single item on the coup, not even an article, is listed in the bibliography. Regrettably, the book ends up being little more than a potted history interspersed with personal assertions.

Michael Howard’s book, the biggest so far on the subject of the coup, approaches from the other side of the political divide. Howard was an active Labour sympathizer and activist while teaching at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. At the start, the author disclaims detachment: “my sense of outrage remains undiminished,” though throughout the text he strives for balance and perspective.

A telescopic summary of precolonial and colonial politics provides the background for the discussion of events leading to the coup. The author’s class perspective organizes the data and shapes his interpretations. No doubt readers will take issue with his emphasis and with his failure to deal with the race factor in Fijian politics that Ravuvu emphasizes. Nevertheless, there is much that is new in this book. Howard effectively uses his close personal observation of events in Fiji, solid contacts within the labor movement there, and access to confidential papers and interviews to support an argument that even his most ardent critics will not be able to dismiss. His discussion of political and economic developments since independence in 1970, and of the formation of the Fiji Labour Party in particular, contains much information that is fresh, revealing, and valuable.

Howard categorically rejects the view that the coup was about race, although a systematic discussion of why he takes this position would have been useful. The coup, he argues, was orchestrated because the election of the Labour government threatened certain vested interests within the Fijian establishment. These included, among others, the chiefly elite of the eastern maritime provinces who felt threatened by the increasing prominence of western Fijians and the restructuring of power within Fijian society that this portended, embittered Alliance politicians who feared exposure for corruption, and expatriate opportunists who had made their fortunes during Mara’s reign.

The Taukei Movement, which in Ravuvu’s account emerges as the united voice of all Fijians, is seen here as “the creation of a few individuals backed by members of the oligarchy who sought to play upon the insecurities and communal sentiments of native Fijians” (273). And Ravuvu’s enlightened paramount chief, Mara, is portrayed by Howard as a Machiavel-
lian figure, constantly maneuvering for advantage, whose denials of complicity run into circumstantial evidence pointing to his involvement.

Howard's book is as comprehensive an account of post-independence Fiji as one is likely to get any time soon. It is also likely to be controversial, deeply influenced as it is by the author's open commitment to the labor movement in Fiji, but even those who may disagree with his ideological stance will find it hard to dismiss his conclusions lightly. The book is a partial account, in the best sense of that word.

Stephanie Lawson takes a more detached and longer view of the crisis and asks why democratic politics failed in Fiji. The importance of her account lies not in the material she presents—much of her study is, she admits, based on widely available secondary literature—but in the questions she asks. More than the other two books, Lawson's is an attempt to situate the 1987 crisis in the context of Fiji's political history over the last century. She also confronts and assesses other interpretations of the coup.

Lawson essentially agrees with Howard's interpretation. Contrary to Ravuvu's claims, she argues, persuasively I think, that the new Labour government did not pose any threat to the privileges and rights of the indigenous Fijians, the racial element being "used to provide a superficially plausible reason for the overthrow of the Bavadra government and as an effective camouflage to deflect attention away from other significant factors" (6). She sees race as an important determinant of political behavior throughout recent Fijian history, but "whether the coup of 14 May was caused essentially by racial factors is another matter entirely" (277).

The central concept around which Lawson constructs her thesis is legitimacy. Politics in Fiji, validated every five years at the ballot box, was legitimate only so long as the eastern-dominated Fijian establishment was in power. It was legitimate so long as it operated under certain assumptions, such as the notion that Fiji was a plural society (in the Furnivallian sense) in which "race was a fact of life," and communalism formed the pillar of electoral politics. In the 1980s, however, many of the assumptions that underlay the idea of the plural society began to be challenged. The notion of Fijian cultural and social homogeneity was challenged by the assertion of western Fijian identity and demand for power in the Fijian scheme of things, while the sectarian, social democratic ideology of the Labour party changed the emphasis "from race to issues concerning socio-economic class, social justice, and commonality of interests between races" (279). Not surprisingly, therefore, those threatened by this change, including the Alliance politicians and the eastern chiefly establishment, conspired to execute the coup to protect their interests.

Readers of this journal will need little reminding that my own interpretation of the coup is closer to those of Howard and Lawson than it is to Ravuvu's. Nevertheless, the unitary, culturalist explanations have also been challenged and exposed by political developments in Fiji since 1987. As I write, Ratu Mara and Sitiveni Rabuka are publicly at loggerheads, accusing
each other of opportunism and worse. Apisai Tora, the founding member of the Taukei Movement, now heads the western-based All Nationals Congress that is openly critical of the regime currently in power. The party of the Great Council of Chiefs, the Soqosoqo ni Vakevulewa ni Taukei, is encountering criticism and opposition from the provinces, while Fijian candidates not selected for election (scheduled for May 1992) are threatening to stand as independents even as they proclaim their loyalty to their chiefs.

Where all this will end must remain a matter for conjecture. Nevertheless, for many people in Fiji, including especially the taukei, the apparent calm and stability of the period prior to 14 May 1987 now seems part of an era rapidly vanishing beyond recall. The past, they are beginning to realize, belongs to another country, as they look toward an uncertain future.

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Milner’s publications assembled by Helen Cordell. As befits a work honoring a scholar who has probed matters Fijian and linguistic over the years, four of the papers deal with specific linguistic problems in Fiji, while one focuses on Samoa and another on Tonga. Three other papers are concerned with related linguistic topics in Oceanic, all of which have a strong reflection in Fijian. The final two papers raise issues that have less of a linguistic component, but cover topics that puzzle linguists.

Three papers consider certain of the more intractable problems in the Oceanic Austronesian language, Fijian. One by David G. Arms tackles the issue of verbs in that language by attempting to formally classify them as agent-oriented (A verbs) and patient-oriented (P verbs), and seeks possible semantic correlations of this division. Although it successfully disputes Albert J. Schütz’ claim of no passive in Fijian in favor of Milner’s analysis, the associations of A and P verbs with various semantic forms turn out to be fuzzy and in need of further study. Schütz’s inquiry into prosody and the clitic bears more fruit, by the simple device of separating the phonological properties from the grammatical ones, and for the grammatical ones introducing the notions of particle, base, marker, and root. The result allows him to show that prosodic change is organized around certain principles. In the third paper, Andrew Pawley and the late Timoci Sayaba rework the old issue of possessive constructions in the various Fijian dialects by examining those of Wayan, a western Fijian language somewhat different from the eastern...