



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles,
book chapters and other publications

Jepson School of Leadership Studies

1999

Racial and Ethnic Studies, Political Science and Mid-Wifery

Vine Deloria Jr.

David E. Wilkins

University of Richmond, dwilkins@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/jepson-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Indian and Aboriginal Law Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilkins, David E. "Racial and Ethnic Studies, Political Science and Midwifery." *Wicazo Sa Review* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1999), 67-76.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Racial and Ethnic Studies, Political Science, and Midwifery

Vine Deloria Jr. and David E. Wilkins

One of the major fallacies of Western civilization, according to Alfred North Whitehead,¹ was the propensity of Western thinkers to assume that ideas generated within their intellectual landscape were indicative of reality itself. Although some phases of Western science, notably physics and philosophy, have transcended their parochial origins, aspects of the old medieval synthesis still remain in the Western worldview. The gradual fragmentation of the old categories of natural history and theology into the isolated sciences and disciplines of today has produced a myriad of separate bodies of knowledge complete with their professional priesthoods and has allowed considerable slippage in the ability of the Western scientific paradigm to generate adequate explanations for the multitude of problems we face as a society.²

The social sciences in particular seem to have separated into fields whose basic orientation continues to reflect the conditions and problems of a century ago. The use of computers only serves to emphasize one aspect of the dream of the founding fathers—that human behavior could be described mathematically while the remainder of the insights available to the respective disciplines slowly withers. Even the relatively new phenomenon of combining subfields and disciplines to produce new academic fields fails to take into account subject matter and ideas that suffered neglect in the decades during which the various social sciences were establishing themselves.

If the academic establishment failed to account for many things

in human experience, people outside the halls of ivy nevertheless continued to live according to the traditions of their ancestors and responded to economic, social, political, and literary forces that affected their lives. In many areas of life ideologies and emotions significantly transcended the ability of social scientists to perceive and describe the events of our time. Today, the social science disciplines seem in disarray in the sense that they have struggled, heretofore unsuccessfully, to produce substantial frameworks for interpreting the complicated events that frequently appear to overwhelm us. The result has been a tendency of the political leadership of the major parties to rely as much on public opinion polls and surveys of attitudes as upon any insight of knowledge regarding the human condition.

THE INADEQUACY OF PRIOR SCHOLARSHIP

Apart from Gunnar Myrdahl's *American Dilemma*,³ which focused the attention of the American intellectual elite on the problems of black-white relations in the United States, there have been relatively few pathbreaking contributions⁴ by social scientists to the solution of racial problems in the United States in the postwar period. Studies like Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman's *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*⁵ tend to gloss over the accumulated store of memories and oral traditions by creating a statistical past whose conditions hardly correspond to the inherited feelings and beliefs of racial minorities in the United States, or they tend to minimize the role racism has actually played in denying the opportunity for all races and ethnic group members to actively participate in the American social contract.⁶ A glance at some of the contemporary literature dealing with racial minorities in the United States is an exercise in contemplating the incoherency of trivia as it attempts to divert attention from the real issues confronting racial and ethnic groups, "blaming the victims" of racism for their situation.⁷

Additionally, the racial, social, and political disruptions of the 1960s and early 1970s, if they have produced any significant changes in the manner in which racial minorities perceive the majority, have inculcated within the oral tradition of minority communities the deep-seated belief that social scientists, if they are not the ultimate enemy, are at least persons to be viewed with a great deal of skepticism and even distrust.

The social and political movements of the 1960s, especially, are characterized by a strange dialectic worthy of comment. The basic thrust of the early social movements was an effort to bring to fruition the promises of American political theory wherein every person was equal before the eyes of the law and had equal access to public and private institutions. That this access was critically related to economic

opportunity became apparent when the goals of the Civil Rights movement shifted rapidly from simple integration to the elimination of poverty. But the movements were hardly Marxist inspired or oriented although economic equality was an avowed and immediate goal. In the minds of the elite of racial minorities, preservation of culture, recasting of historical experiences and grievances, and projection of positive future images became as important as access to economic affluence. Thus, we had demands for ethnic studies programs in colleges and universities correlative with affirmative action in institutional employment practices.⁸

The first phase of ethnic studies was the effort to bring the experiences of the past to the attention of the larger society with a mixed set of motives generating the demand. For some minority individuals it was sufficient to pinpoint specific instances of discrimination and oppression as a means of establishing claims on the present generation for social and economic reforms that would in some small measure compensate the existing generation for its heritage of poverty and limited opportunity. Others saw the resurrection of past events as a means of explaining to members of their communities the manner in which present conditions arose, the ideologies undergirding discrimination and broad philosophical assumptions that continue to bolster present racial attitudes, and to find alternative worldviews that could be used to critique and reform existing institutions.

A survey of the literature produced during the last three decades by intellectuals within minority groups falls roughly into two categories: protest poetry and essay and political tracts either reviewing past experiences or articulating present demands and policies based upon past experiences.⁹

Insofar as we are able to find any outreach by American racial minorities toward the spectrum of American intellectualism, it must fall either in literature or political science. The scarcity of economic, sociological, psychological, and religious concerns, as expressed by members of minority communities, indicates that intuitive tangent points existing between the larger society and any particular racial minority are severely restricted. Even if one included recent efforts by black theologians to enter the field of liberation theology as a significant movement in the religious sphere, the basic Marxist orientation of liberation theology and its efforts to emphasize the phenomenon of oppression as a preamble to discussion of religious doctrines makes it more a matter of political ideas in vestments than theology in the traditional mode.

Literature will always, or we may hope always, transcend history and political institutions to continually recast human experiences in the symbols of response and reflection. However, while literature may produce the psychic emotions necessary to urge reform, it cannot, except in the most unique and accidental instances, articulate and advocate

specific institutional and policy changes necessary to move society to a higher plateau. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* may have inspired a generation of reformers to devote their efforts to social and institutional reform for African Americans and indigenous peoples, but without an adequate philosophical understanding of what that reform might require, the ultimate institutional product for blacks was *Plessy v. Ferguson*,¹⁰ and for tribal nations it was *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*.¹¹ From a contemporary standpoint, two other examples would be that the rise of Black Power ultimately spawned the landmark affirmative action case in 1978, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*,¹² while Indian activism and reassertions of sovereignty led to a major diminishment of tribal sovereignty in the pivotal 1978 ruling, *Olipbant v. Suquamish*.¹³ If there is significant literary expression of minority group complaints, there should be a correspondingly equal amount of attention paid to the policies and theories that call forth these complaints.

POLITICAL SCIENCE: THE MOST APPROPRIATE MIDWIFE

Political science represents the best hope for resolving the perennial American dilemma of racism and stands today at the threshold of an opportunity rarely accorded a social science. Unlike its sister sciences of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, political science, at least in the United States, has less of the continuing odor of colonial arrogance that infects the concepts and academic establishment of the above-mentioned social sciences. Racial and ethnic minorities do not feel they are the captive-client property of political science, whereas their attitudes toward anthropology, sociology, and psychology are hardly benign. In addition, the political scientists with whom racial and ethnic minority groups have most recently come into contact have not taken the attitude of a superior observing and informing an inferior on things central to the understanding and emotional life of the inferior. Although it is a humility born out of naiveté, it is nevertheless a humility that has produced a credible psychic capital that may now form the basis of a potentially healthy future relationship.

The areas of most significant concern for racial and ethnic minorities are precisely those areas in which political science has great expertise. Frequent complaints about the present image of minorities center about the negative terms in which minorities are seen by the majority, coupled with the continual parade of negative statistics that are used to characterize and describe minority participation in American society. Almost without exception the negative statistics arise because of the fundamental belief that equality is identical with homogeneity and cultural parity, and the measurements that the statistics

purport to make are premised upon the unexamined assumption that, given the proper economic and educational opportunity, the members of racial and ethnic minority groups will behave precisely in the manner that the majority believes it presently does. This belief, unfortunately, is well-entrenched in the minds of federal and state policy-makers at nearly every level of government and in virtually every institution that confronts racial minorities. And while its fallacy is readily apparent, it cannot be dislodged without a significant recasting of our knowledge of institutions and theories regarding the manner in which our society has organized itself from its inception. Moreover, this recasting must be done in such a manner as to seem self-evident for those who would learn from it.

One need only glance backward at American political history to discover that the self-evident is always apparent. Every major American racial minority entered American society and encountered American political institutions in a highly formal context. Although African-American slavery was premised upon certain economic factors coupled with outmoded Aristotelian beliefs transformed into religious imperialism and missionary ventures, one of the most important factors in the African-American experience, we should remember, is that the complex of ideas about the status of African Americans achieved a political-legal expression that required three Constitutional amendments (the 13th, 14th, and 15th) and a seemingly endless procession of litigation to resolve. Despite many welcomed advances in the political, economic, and social status of many African Americans, we are nowhere near the end of the process of resolution even as we rush headlong into the third millennium.

Indigenous nations, from 1532¹⁴ to the present, regardless of whatever other factors may have been invoked to describe, control, or alter their relationship with European immigrants, have been viewed within the political-legal context, and this location has influenced every other change in their lives. Principles such as the Doctrine of Discovery, the plenary power of Congress, guardianship-wardship, aboriginal title to lands, and the ultimate location of discretionary power in the executive as "trustee" for tribes that were denominated by the Supreme Court as "domestic dependent nations" in 1831, continue with as much legal and political force today as they did when first articulated and with equally depressing and catastrophic results.¹⁵

Hispanic Americans, still characterized too often today as "aliens," a term originating in the courts of the Texas Republic as its citizens attempted to stabilize their land titles following the revolt against Mexico, entered the American political system as the result of the United States' imperialistic war against Mexico followed by a disastrous treaty of peace that in most instances failed to protect Hispanics from the systematic depredations that followed. Described as "whites"

until the *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District* case in 1972,¹⁶ where the application of *Brown v. Board of Education*¹⁷ to their group was made final, Hispanic Americans nevertheless have significant political claims yet to be made on American society and will become, with their rapidly increasing population, an even more influential social, economic, and political force in the American future. Even today their status in this country is affected by a variety of laws and policies that can only be described adequately by political concepts. The same can be said for the related groups, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, who, apart from the similarity in language to Hispanic Americans, have uniquely different histories, again encompassed by political concepts and events and subject to radical changes generated and inspired by external events of their homelands.

Asian-Americans represent a wide spectrum of Eastern cultural and political traditions, yet they emerge in American history and in American political life as the result of specific treaties and laws that encompassed and inhibited them from their first contact with the state. Deprived of property and citizenship, Asian-Americans' first experience with the American political system was not cultural or literary but involved mindless bureaucracy and demeaning discrimination. The Chinese Exclusion laws¹⁸ were but the most blatant example of a long history of oppression and misunderstanding. And the internment of thousands of Japanese-Americans¹⁹ during the Second World War can hardly be described except in political and constitutional terms.

In very recent times the emergence of the Hawaiian and Trust Territory peoples as a distinct racial minority, although in most instances forgotten because of their geographical distance from the continental land mass, presents but another case in which the American political system must respond before significant changes in other aspects of life can be determined. The failure or refusal of the American military to withdraw from areas of the Pacific following the Second World War, the use of the Pacific atolls for atomic tests, and the continual misunderstanding of political appointees in the islands under American trust supervision are but microcosms, and helpless microcosms at that, of the larger American failure in Asia as experienced in the Vietnam War.

A survey of the literature dealing with all of these groups would reveal, until very recent years, a paucity of attention by political scientists.²⁰ Yet the fundamental truth persists that the political relationship of the United States to these particular groups has largely produced their present configuration and that the influence of American culture, while it has made significant inroads into the community life of these groups, has nevertheless itself been inhibited by political institutions and legal doctrines that prevented and continue to prevent racial minorities from achieving a clear and permanent place in American society.

It can be argued that within the Constitutional framework, and

certainly within the existing political institutions, little room can be found for dissident views and patterns of behavior that would be represented most significantly by these groups in the overall perspective of American political life. This argument, however, overlooks the pervasive influence in both political institutions and law of the unexamined assumptions hiding behind American society regarding the superiority of the Western expression of civilization. A realistic glance at the present condition of our nation and its escalating set of political, economic, social, religious, and environmental problems would seem to indicate that the basic philosophical framework of American society needs examination and recasting.

Political science presents itself as a discipline capable of confronting human political activities and making sense out of the manner in which the human species has chosen to organize itself in a formal manner. But the concern with formal institutions and the corresponding measurement of attitudes regarding these institutions is but a small portion of human experience, and too often the discipline makes the same mistake regarding the richness of American life as other disciplines. The American experiment should be viewed as a specific and unique effort to bring into human activity a particular manner of organizing society that is designed to allow maximum individual freedom and to reduce institutional coercion to its minimal expression. At least part of this reduction should be accomplished by the recognition that the true metaphysics underlying American institutions is planetary in nature and is not a forced North American expression of Mediterranean or North Atlantic cultural beliefs.

The task, therefore, is not to unleash a variety of political scientists trained in the folkways, values, and beliefs of the majority culture on unsuspecting racial and ethnic minority and indigenous communities. To do so would only recapitulate past grievous errors of other disciplines. Rather, political science should become the broader intellectual context within which the respective minority groups can study and articulate their own experiences, individual and group, in their continuing confrontation with the institutions and conceptualizations of the larger society. Political science, if it is to have any relationship at all with minority groups, must become the midwife of new fields of study in which minorities would present their understanding of human legal and political organization. Too many racial and ethnic studies groups continue to seek haven within the halls of academe nestled, sometimes uncomfortably, with sociologists and anthropologists, and continue to seek an understanding of themselves through a Western psychology heavily dependent upon the characters of Greek drama—Oedipus, Electra, and so forth—only because political science has lacked the vision to understand the effect of American political institutions on racial minorities when cast in restrictive and discriminatory policies.

Were political science to broaden its perspective and recognize the insights available from the racial minority groups and indigenous nations regarding the manner in which law and political institutions channel energies of distinct groups and create, in their application of discriminatory policies, responses and reactions manifest in other areas of life, it could embark on a broadening of its offerings and clientele. All racial and ethnic studies programs should originate in the context of political science and where significant developments with literature, economics, history, religion, and sociology appear, clear linkages should be defined. Discussing the oppression of any particular racial or ethnic group or indigenous nation apart from immigration policies, prohibitions on ownership of property, discrimination in public services, and voting franchise is patently ridiculous because it pretends that the cause of grief is not a material factor to be considered in assuaging it.

CONCLUSION

Racial and ethnic studies, then, should become a valid and increasingly significant subfield of political science. It should be allowed to pass through the traditional stages of development that subfields frequently experience. It should not be tied to traditional and often outmoded technical requirements of method and statistics until the basic structure of its theoretical base is established. Racial and ethnic studies can immediately link in with political theory because that specialty represents the initial conceptual framework within which the respective minority groups had to be accommodated historically. If faculties and departments can recognize this present opportunity to enrich their discipline and can establish as a goal the creation of a set of individual bodies of knowledge capable of rooting themselves in the particular experiences of racial minorities in the United States and ultimately in other industrial countries, and if political scientists can maintain some of the present humility that ignorance of the subject has created, then the discipline might in the next century establish itself as the central concentration in an array of social sciences intent on explaining and illuminating human behavior.

NOTES

- 1 *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925).
- 2 See, for example, two of Vine Deloria's recent works where the inherent flaws in such a fragmentary and particularistic approach are pointed out and where he argues that indigenous knowledge

systems provide a more comprehensive and realistic approach to understanding and relating to the natural world—*Indian Education in America* (Boulder, CO: American Indian Science & Engineering Society, 1991) and *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner,

- 1995). And see Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro's *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) for an internal critique by two prominent political scientists of the rational choice school of political science, which for several decades has served as the dominant and most allegedly rigorous theoretical approach to understanding the nature of collective choice, the behavior of political parties and politicians, and phenomena like voting cycles. While our critique is somewhat different from Green and Shapiro, our main concurrence centers on what drives the quest for knowledge. As Green and Shapiro note: "It is our impression, however, that much rational choice theory is method driven rather than problem driven. . . . Empirical science is problem driven when the elaboration of theories is designed to explain phenomena that arise in the world. Method-driven research occurs when a theory is elaborated without reference to what phenomena are to be explained, and the theorist subsequently searches for phenomena to which the theory in question can be applied" (194).
- 3 New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944.
 - 4 There have been some outstanding contributions to the literature that have shed an important measure of light on a variety of subjects. See the bibliography in Paula D. McClain's and John A. Garcia's "Expanding Disciplinary Boundaries: Black, Latino, and Racial Minority Group Politics in Political Science," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline, II*, edited by Ada W. Finifter (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1993): 247-79 for a list of some of these works.
 - 5 Boston: Little, Brown, 1974.
 - 6 See, for example, Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), which is a book of impressive longitudinal and subject matter scope, but which does an inadequate job dealing with the vehemence and persistence of American racism.
 - 7 See, e.g., Thomas Sowell's *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991).
 - 8 See Vine Deloria Jr., "Identity and Culture" in Ronald Takaki's (ed.) *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 93-102.
 - 9 From an indigenous perspective, examples of protest poetry would include Peter Blue Cloud, ed., *Alcatraz Is Not an Island* (Berkeley, CA: Wingbow Press, 1972); Shirley Hill Witt and Stan Steiner, *The Way: An Anthology of American Indian Literature* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Duane Niatum, ed., *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry* (New York: Harpers, 1975); and Kenneth Rosen, ed., *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians* (New York: Viking Press, 1974). Examples of political tracts would include Robert K. Thomas, "Colonialism: Classic & Internal," *New University Thought* 4, 4 (1966/67); Edgar S. Cahn, ed., *Our Brother's Keeper: The Indian in White America* (New York: World Publishing, 1969); Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1969), *We Talk, You Listen* (New York: Dell Books, 1970), and *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* (New York: Delta Books, 1974); Richard Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island: Indian Occupation of

- Alcatraz," *Ramparts* (December 1972); Bruce Johansen and Robert Maestas, *Wasi'cbu: The Continuing Indian Wars* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Rex Weyler, *Blood of the Land: The United States Government and Corporate War against the American Indian Movement* (New York: Everest House, 1982); and Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: Viking Press, 1991).
- 10 163 U.S. 537 (1896). This case established the infamous "separate but equal" doctrine in federal law, which ensured that African Americans would remain in an inequitable political and economic position vis-à-vis the majority society until well into the 20th century.
- 11 187 U.S. 553 (1903). This decision established the precedent that Congress had plenary authority over tribal lands and resources and that this authority could evidence itself in the abrogation of Indian treaties. Furthermore, such congressional power was deemed not subject to judicial review because it was held that these were political questions.
- 12 438 U.S. 265 (1978). In *Bakke*, the Court held that quota systems for minorities in college admissions were unconstitutional, but also that the Constitution was not "color-blind" and affirmative action programs were permissible to achieve a diverse student body in higher education programs.
- 13 435 U.S. 191 (1978). In *Oliphant* the Supreme Court held that Indian tribes no longer possessed criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians who committed crimes within reservation borders.
- 14 In this year, Franciscus de Victoria, a Dominican scholar, delivered a three-part lecture entitled "On the Indians Lately Discovered" that contained arguments that are "widely recognized as a primary source of the basic principles of post-sixteenth-century Spanish colonial legal theory as well as of the treatment of indigenous colonized peoples under modern international and United States law" (see Robert A. Williams Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990]: 96-97).
- 15 See Oren Lyons and John Mohawk, eds., *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the United States Constitution* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1992) for a comprehensive compilation of essays that address many of these baffling and legally and morally questionable doctrines.
- 16 467 F.2d 142, cert. den., 413 U.S. 920 (1973).
- 17 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- 18 25 St. 504. This law was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902, and it remained entrenched until 1943.
- 19 Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America: Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981).
- 20 But see the comprehensive McClain and Garcia article, "Expanding Disciplinary Boundaries . . ." cited earlier for recent literature by political scientists focused on African Americans and Latinos. For scholarship on the discipline's failure to adequately treat indigenous issues, see Anne M. McCulloch, "Perspectives on Native Americans in Political Science," *Teaching Political Science* 12, 1 (spring 1989): 92-98; and Franke Wilmer, Michael E. Melody, and Margaret Maier Murdock, "Including Native American Perspectives in the Political Science Curriculum," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 27, 2 (June 1994): 269-76.