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Contested Terrain: Understanding The Persistence Of Racial Inequality In America

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Review Essay

Contested Terrain: Understanding the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America

Michael Goldfield. The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics. New York: The New Press, 1997.

Jennifer Hochschild. Facing Up to the American Dream. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Robert C. Lieberman. Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Keith Reeves. Voting Hopes or Fears? Oxford University Press, 1997.

Paul M. Sniderman and Edward G. Carmines. Reaching Beyond Race. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

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A half-century ago, Gunnar Myrdal called attention to a dramatic contrast between American values and American practices on the question of race. Yet, he suggested, America would live up to its creed; liberal democratic politics could bring about a liberal society. The extent to which current scholars share Myrdal's optimism depends largely upon their analysis of the forces that pattern the politics of race.

Evaluating the state of racial relations today, the picture is mixed. In public opinion, the trends seem mostly positive. Robert Lieberman speaks of "a revolution in racial attitudes" occurring in the United States from 1940-1960 (1). Likewise, the achievements of the black middle class give us encouragement. When we turn to the economic and social well-being of the majority of African-Americans, however, we are reminded that "today, black Americans remain significantly more likely than whites to be poor, to be raised by a single parent, to be segregated residentially and educationally, and to die young. Although more blacks are better off than ever before, a frighteningly large number are immiserated: ill-educated, ill-housed, and underemployed or unemployed" (Carmines and Sniderman, 2). The incidence of hate crimes and hate speech directed at African-Americans, along with the vitriol and vitality of white supremacist groups, also give us pause. Have African-Americans won a proportionate share of political power? "Although African-Americans can vote," writes Lieberman, "the worth of their votes and their access to real political power remain in serious question" (ix).

What is the nature of current barriers to full racial equality, and how readily would these barriers yield to goodwill and to policy reform? Are these illiberal vestiges, intransigent problems, or barriers endemic to liberalism itself? Sniderman and Carmines have little doubt that Myrdal's optimism is warranted, even if some policies have been counterproductive and a great deal of work remains to be done. They are inclined to think of race as liberalism's anomaly. Robert Lieberman argues that racism or racist ideology does not suffice to explain racial domination in America. He retains some faith that liberal institutions might be made to work, despite the role they have played in inscribing and reinscribing racial statuses. Michael Goldfield finds that race-class divisions perform a vital function in a system of white capitalist domination and are inextricably bound up with the survival of liberalism. Yet, despite the fact that many economic interests benefit from continuing racial domination, and despite some evidence that systems of domination have become increasingly entrenched, Goldfield argues that these systems are far from unshakable.

Survey researchers Sniderman and Carmines work hard and cleverly to get Americans to say what they really think about race. Most of their data come from the 1991 Race and Politics Study and the 1994 Multiple Investigator Study—both national telephone samples conducted by Berkeley's Survey Research Center. The key to their approach lies in embedding complex and randomized experiments in their public opinion interviews in ways that are invisible to respondents. The authors find a public more reconciled to racial equality than politicians' rhetoric would suggest. Indeed, there is a reservoir of good will on the part of many whites despite the polarized rhetoric of political elites. The argument is reminiscent of E. J. Dionne's argument that political elites create false polarizations rather than stress what Americans agree upon (*Why Americans Hate Politics*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991). Dionne claims that the ideologies of liberalism and conservatism frame issues as "a series of false choices" (11); the country wishes to move on while leaders continue to fight tiresome, ideological battles.

Likewise, Sniderman and Carmines argue that the blame for mistaken public policies on race must be laid at the feet of liberal policymakers. These liberal politicians and policymakers lacked faith in the tolerance and fair-mindedness of the American public and consequently turned too quickly to coercive measures. If there is a backlash on racial policy, liberals are to blame for it.

In an interesting set of findings, Sniderman and Carmines demonstrate that self-proclaimed liberals are as hostile to affirmative action as self-proclaimed conservatives (ch. 2). Color-blind policies, rather than color-coded ones, comport far better with Americans' sense of justice. On other issues as well the authors find that white and African-American respondents tend to see the same reality and share the same values (151). The good news, therefore,

is that the racial attitudes of the general public are not a major barrier to the achievement of racial equality. If correct, these findings ought to encourage liberal policy elites to think about new and more productive ways to advance the cause of racial equality.

Yet, no matter how clever the “excuse experiments” and other experiments the authors embed in the survey data, the evidence may not be as conclusive as Sniderman and Carmines would have it. Keith Reeves, another scholar examining public opinion on racial questions, also embeds social experiments in public opinion surveys and comes to different conclusions about the persistence of racism in America. Using a University of Michigan 1992 Detroit Area Study and the Biracial Election Campaign Survey face-to-face interview portion of that study, Reeves determined that a considerable segment of white respondents harbored anti-black sentiments. Though some categories of whites were quite empathetic to blacks, the majority of whites in his sample were negative in their attitudes, opinions, and characterizations of black Americans. “The contemporary tendency of whites to discriminate against black political candidates on account of race shows how little *underlying* attitudes have changed despite the significant gains made possible by the Voting Rights Act” (93, italics in original).

The disparity between the optimism of Sniderman and Carmines and the more pessimistic assessment of Reeves can be accounted for in part by differences in the survey questions and the kinds of social experiments embedded in the surveys. Sniderman and Carmines are interested in explaining the impact of racial prejudice on policy preferences. Reeves is asking specifically about white voters’ willingness to vote for black candidates. The question addressed in *Voting Hopes or Fears?* is whether “racial campaign appeals embedded in print news campaign coverage actually shape whites’ receptivity toward black political aspirants” (33). Reeves’s social experiment involved the manipulation of campaign news stories, varying factors such as the race of the candidate and mention of affirmative action. Sniderman and Carmines, of course, have characterized affirmative action as a lose-lose proposition since both liberals and conservatives strongly oppose it; in their view, it polarizes unnecessarily on the basis of race. But a good part of Sniderman and Carmines’s optimism rests on the distinction between the impact of racially charged communication by political elites and what white respondents say and think in the absence of such racially charged communications. In other words, if what is going on weren’t going on, attitudes would not be racist. Sniderman and Carmines conclude that if the majority of Americans are fair-minded and believe in equal opportunity and equal treatment, Americans are being ill-served by many political leaders. “The practice of racializing arguments over justice for the last generation has been a godsend for demagogues, black and white,” they conclude (154). If politicians would only talk about

moral universals rather than make race-specific moral arguments, they argue, Myrdal's vision would finally be realized.

This, it seems to me, is an overly-optimistic counterfactual. The evidence on racial tolerance is not as compelling as Sniderman and Carmines would have us believe, and the evidence for their proposition that whites and blacks see the same basic reality is also contestable. Here, it should be pointed out that the authors put a great deal of emphasis on a few questions that are, themselves, rather suspect. For example, black and white respondents are invited to offer explanations in response to the open-ended question of why "the average black person in America is worse off than the average white person" (132). They are also asked to choose set responses to the statement that "In the past, the Irish, the Italians, the Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors" (136). Simple cross-tabulated responses to these questions bear the weight of the task of constructing an argument about a cross-race meeting of minds on issues of racial justice.

Indeed, other scholars examining racial patterns in attitudes and values have reached quite different conclusions. Jennifer Hochschild, in *Facing Up to the American Dream*, sees African-Americans' acceptance of, and acceptance within, the American dream as rather more fraught and ambiguous. Relying on survey data from a variety of sources, Hochschild sees a real possibility that "the American dream can collapse in upon itself as thoroughly as any savings and loan bank" (258). She argues that "Blacks and whites increasingly diverge in their evaluations of whether the American dream encompasses African Americans. . . . In addition, middle-class blacks are increasingly disillusioned with the very ideology of the dream itself, and poor blacks may not be far behind" (86). Hochschild believes that the pessimism in evidence among middle-class African-Americans may be the product of more elusive forms of bias (demonstrable in psychology experiments) and the changed political climate of the Reagan era. In any case, her comparisons of white and African-American beliefs, and of differences within the African-American community, present a richer and more complicated picture of racial attitudes in America.

Reaching Beyond Race is a strangely apolitical book. The path from attitudes to racial equality is rather uncluttered. The historical means by which racial inequality has been perpetuated appear irrelevant. The institutions and organizations of state and civil society seem to have rather little to do with patterning the politics of race, beyond prolonging a dysfunctional support for affirmative action. The findings from Sniderman and Carmines's study, while very interesting, do not seem to warrant the broad pronouncements about the route to racial equality the authors offer.

Goldfield and Lieberman are far more attentive to structural and institu-

tional obstacles to racial equality. Lieberman points out that these obstacles are firmly entrenched in policies and the administrative structures they spawn, and help create and perpetuate patterns of racial inclusion and exclusion. Myrdal's hope is not completely ruled out, but the picture becomes much more complex. There is something amiss with the perspective that "racism, understood as an ideology of racial exploitation, [is] the prime mover in shaping racial domination" (Lieberman, 10).

For Goldfield, the barriers to racial equality are to be found in the divisions among, and demobilization of, the working class, fostered by regimes of domination that favor capitalist classes. The liberal tradition that is the source of Myrdal's hope could more readily be characterized as the source of the problem for Goldfield. Rather than consider racism an anomaly in the American polity, Lieberman and Goldfield are more inclined toward Hochschild's "symbiosis" thesis—that "racism and American liberal democracy are mutually constitutive [and] that the American political order is built on a foundation of racial domination" (Lieberman, 10). Goldfield would go further in his insistence that this is a system of racial-class domination. Lieberman would agree with Goldfield—at least with regard to some of the New Deal welfare programs he examines—that "the racial discrimination and exclusion of the labor market meant that so-called race-neutral policies, even when they were implemented in a nondiscriminatory way, often only served to strengthen the system of racial domination as it already existed" (Goldfield, 199). And Lieberman would refine the "symbiosis" thesis by looking at the contingencies of policies: how they differently encode, and differently perpetuate, distinctions among the races. Institutional differences in the organization of policy matter.

Michael Goldfield's *The Color of Politics* reinterprets, re-evaluates, and synthesizes evidence on race, class, and patterns of racial domination in American history. The book has a broad historical scope, locating five turning points in American political development. At each juncture social class conflict is judged to be at a high level, and questions of race are deemed central to the outcome of the struggle. The resolution of these struggles yields new arrangements of social control and a reorganized system of racial domination and subordination (29). Hopes for greater racial justice hinge on movements involving integrated action on the part of the working class, from Bacon's Rebellion to mass politics of early Reconstruction, the Knights of Labor and the Populists, and Depression-era movements of the unemployed. At the height of labor struggles, when class consciousness and organization seem predominant, Goldfield also finds a commitment to fighting racial discrimination (31). Rather than treating the engine of social change as changing attitudes or the top-down policies of political elites, Goldfield looks to popular insurgencies, and in particular, the collaboration of white left-wing workers

with African-Americans. Here, Goldfield issues another salvo in an argument he has been making for some years: that the key to American exceptionalism is found in the interplay of race and class.

The book is organized chronologically and ranges from the era of colonization to the present. While this broad-scale investigation considers economic shifts and unemployment data, party realignments, changing demographics, candidate appeals, and policy, Goldfield's chief love remains with the history of organized workers' struggles. There are many rich stories in *The Color of Politics*, but they are generally filtered through the history of the labor movement. Here, one finds more about labor-led civil rights work, and about CIO and Communist Party postures on race, than about African-American mobilizations for racial equality.

For Goldfield, the most significant periods of change and progress for African-Americans have come when mass movements command center stage in American politics. Transformations in government and public policy resulted largely from pressure from mass movements, even if the policy changes were not as extensive as one might expect from the degree of protest (e.g., during the New Deal). The strength and moral authority of these mass movements is attributable chiefly to their solidaristic thrust. Indeed, these movements lost much of their strength and moral authority whenever key sections of it abandoned the African-American working class, as did the CIO in the 1940s, in Goldfield's view.

Goldfield characterizes post-World War II American politics as "a series of escalating and increasingly successful experiments in the building of a national white racist political coalition" (308). Racist appeals serve as cover for pro-business, pro-wealth policies "designed to undermine the remnants of class solidarity and awareness that remained from the 1930s and 1940s" (309). The lever for racism in this era involves the series of policies fostering economic globalization and domestic economic downsizing, financial mergers and junk bond trading, deregulation, and the reduction or elimination of social benefits—policies that hurt the working classes. Goldfield argues that political rhetoric since the 1960s encourages whites to engage in scapegoating—a rhetoric often focused on blacks. Class issues are submerged; race, the "mainspring of American politics," becomes more pronounced (309-10). While the evidence Goldfield offers about the most recent sub-era of class-race politics comes from candidate appeals rather than policies, the thesis is quite provocative.

The argument seems to require a fair amount of concerted and coordinated, self-conscious activity among fractions of the capitalist classes—or alternately, a state (comprised of class agents?) that forges the system of white supremacy in the interest of capital or portions thereof. The class character of the state, and the rather solidaristic interests of business (albeit divided into

two capitalist parties) tend to be assumed. Goldfield does not offer much elaboration on these issues.

Lieberman's fine, narrowly focused book in the field of American political development argues that "the status of racial groups in society results not necessarily from the mobilization of racist ideology but from the normal workings of social and political arrangements" (11). Concentrating on the institutional and administrative arrangements for three New Deal social welfare policies (Old Age Insurance, Unemployment Insurance, and Aid to Dependent Children, which became AFDC in the 1960s), Lieberman argues that "race inhibited the development of a strong, unitary, centralized welfare state in the United States, and . . . the fragmented American welfare state helped to reshape the politics of race and the place of racial minorities in American life" (6). Institutions vary in their susceptibility to institutional racism. "Whereas some institutions may produce or perpetuate racially unequal social relations, others may remain racially neutral, or even compensate for racial inequality" (12). It is also the case that racially neutral institutions can mobilize and perpetuate racial bias in society. The intent of the policy is an inadequate guide to predicting racial incorporation or exclusion; it is critical to analyze administrative structures and the structure of financing a policy calls into play. Thus, the institutional structure of social policies hold out different possibilities for meaningful change over time, an argument reiterated in successive chapters.

Two broad institutional areas are considered—policy design and administrative structure. Policy design includes issues of benefits (egalitarian or discretionary) and financing (contributory or noncontributory). Administrative structure includes the level of government primarily responsible for implementing the policy (national or state), the openness of the agency to political influence, the policy environment (stable or unstable, unitary or decentralized, and so forth), and the type of public contact that seems to prevail with respect to a given policy. In the case of welfare policy, Lieberman finds centralized administrative institutions far preferable to decentralized and parochial ones. The more discretion left to local levels, the more state and local officials seemed to use federal policy to reinforce existing status/class/race differences, in the South as well as in the North. Since white elites generally dominated these local power structures, policy implementation tended to operate to the disadvantage of African-Americans—either by excluding them or by incorporating them on unfavorable terms.

Lieberman finds that Old Age Insurance institutions, with their procedural egalitarianism, promoted the growth of a politically constructed black middle class, while Aid to Dependent Children promoted the construction of a different political identity for those eventually incorporated—the urban underclass (120-21). Such parochial policies "mitigated the inclusive potential of public

assistance by institutionalizing multiple and decentralized structures of power” (218). Unemployment Insurance, designed more for the needs and experiences of white workers in a white industrial economy, did not work as well for African-Americans who, even when incorporated in the industrial workforce, tended to have a harder time finding and keeping work than white counterparts. Because of a legacy of racism, “they were largely shut out of labor unions, social networks, and kinship groups that fed into stable industrial and commercial employment” (213). Unemployment insurance did not devolve, like ADC, into a morass of state and local racial politics, and eventually came to serve an increasingly stable black middle class. But, as Lieberman demonstrates, it was a program which also helped structure distinctions between an African-American middle class and an urban underclass.

At least superficially, Sniderman and Carmines, Lieberman, and Goldfield agree with the proposition that broader-based, racially nondifferentiated policies and politics have the best chance of improving the condition of African-Americans. What this means, however, differs. Sniderman and Carmines advocate color-blind politics and policy. Rather than the universalism of expanding the circle of beneficiaries for social welfare programs, Sniderman and Carmines advocate programs that focus “on principles common to blacks and whites whether poor or not” (153). This is what they mean by reaching beyond race: equal opportunity and equal treatment are morally universalistic arguments that will persuade far better than morally particularistic ones. Goldfield would be skeptical that such an approach serves to advance racial equality. The universalism to which Goldfield aspires is the working class struggle that crosses racial lines and which acquires broad moral force. Contradictory features, instability, and flux in the current system of race relations provides him with some basis for hope.

In general, Lieberman feels that policies incorporating African-Americans alongside other beneficiaries, and which are administered in an egalitarian, nonracialized manner, have the greatest potential to erase the stigma of race, and to construct beneficiaries as worthy, deserving citizens. To this picture (derived from the work of Theda Skocpol, William Julius Wilson, and others) Lieberman adds another dimension: the key policy decisions are those establishing its institutional structure. Ultimately, the institutions of public policy “affect the way policies treat different social groups, whether defined by race, class, gender, or any other characteristics—shaping not only the degree of a policy’s universalism but also its ability to mediate between global patterns of social and economic change and the everyday lives of citizens” (225). Public policies, Lieberman reminds us, do not execute themselves mechanically. Race-neutral approaches to social policy of the Skocpol-Wilson variety may be less universal than they appear, and may favor dominant groups. The breadth of the target population is only one factor in universalism; the politi-

cal institutions governing the operation of a policy and that set the terms of its future politics are vital in the ultimate extent of the program's universalism, its effectiveness, and its popular support (227). This argument, amply demonstrated throughout the book, makes an important contribution to current social policy debates. Lieberman demonstrates the heterogeneity of racial outcomes that are possible within the liberal state.

Goldfield, in contrast, focuses on mass pressures, electoral imperatives, and the intentions of policymakers that mattered in shaping the character of New Deal social welfare policies. Yet, although quite different in tone and method, Lieberman and Goldfield agree on the deleterious effects of locally-administered programs. For Goldfield, who illustrates the point with New Deal work relief policies (CCC, FEMA, WPA), decentralization and local discretion generally encourage discrimination in federal policies.

This portrait of state and local elites as serious impediments to greater racial equality in America reinforces the liberal Democratic vision of the role of the federal government, a vision that reached its zenith in the 1960s. That is, the federal government (including the federal courts) are seen as the appropriate governmental units to which to turn for enlightened, progressive, and egalitarian policies—for African-Americans, for women, and for working people. Does this remain true? This enduring hope is certainly apparent in Lieberman's work. In the aftermath of Reagan, the federal government performs a somewhat different role. A Democratic president has ended AFDC. Tougher environmental standards often emanate from state and local governments rather than from the federal government. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund changed its strategy in the late 1980s so as to try to keep employment discrimination cases out of the now-conservative federal court system. With regard to achieving greater racial equality in the twenty-first century, and with regard to a broader progressive agenda, perhaps the federal government is not the only game in town. Because of the monumental stakes involved in federal policy, looking with hope toward other arenas of conflict might seem counterintuitive. However, the model for transformative political and social movements in the near future may not derive from the labor movement, as Goldfield so passionately hopes, or even from the Civil Rights movement. Perhaps, instead, the drive toward racial equality will be advanced by other types of interracial political and social movements, operating subnationally.