

Explorations in Signs and Symbols

Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza. *The Scar of Race*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993) xi, 212 pp., \$18.95.

Into the murky, politically-charged waters of contemporary racial politics shines this welcome ray of light. Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza, using clever research design and innovative techniques, clarify the changing meaning of race in today's political landscape and conclusively dismiss many strongly-held, but nonetheless inaccurate, assumptions about whites' attitudes toward African Americans.

One of the authors' principal accomplishments is their demonstration that there is not a single issue of race in America. Rather, racial attitudes are complex and multifaceted. Most importantly, they insist, attitudes toward African Americans are an issue separate from attitudes toward governmental programs that seek to benefit African Americans.

Whites' views no longer center simply on whether they like or dislike African Americans. The authors identify three separate "agendas" that too often become conflated in discussions of race and politics: the equal treatment agenda, the social welfare agenda, and the race-conscious agenda. A white person might believe that African Americans deserve treatment equal to the that of whites (a matter on the equal treatment agenda), but might oppose government spending to achieve that parity (a matter on the social welfare agenda). Or a white person might favor some forms of government spending to benefit disadvantaged fellow citizens (again, social welfare), but oppose affirmative action (a race-conscious agenda item) because it is perceived to be unfair. Attitudes toward one agenda do not dictate attitudes toward the other two. The current debates about race, however, founder because they fail to distinguish among these three agendas.

General attitudes toward the role of government more strongly influence whites' feelings about pro-African American programs than does raw racism. Self-defined liberals tend to support such intervention; self-defined conservatives tend to oppose it. Yet, conservatives' opposition does not stem, as conventional wisdom has it, from prejudice, the authors argue. While many whites still harbor negative feelings toward African Americans, those feelings do not correlate with opposition to government programs.

The authors note that prior studies of American race prejudice have suffered from a perceived validity flaw: some feel that whites simply hide their racism from researchers. Sniderman and Piazza, however, demonstrate that significant numbers of whites discuss, with surprising candor, negative opinions about African

Americans. The authors point out, based on careful statistical reasoning, that those prejudices do not explain opposition to governmental policies.

The authors also show, interestingly, that prejudice tends to be across-the-board when it is found: a person who harbors negative feelings about African Americans probably also dislikes Jews. They found further that prejudice against African Americans as a group tends to disappear when a single, hypothetical African American is discussed. For example, a person who agrees with negative statements about African Americans might nevertheless express support for a hypothetical laid-off African American worker. The stronger determinant for or against such assistance is whether the hypothetical unemployed person—white or black—seems to be trying to assist self.

The book demonstrates the amazing pliability of white attitudes toward government programs. Contrary to what many commentators believe, whites generally are not firmly entrenched in their positions regarding government policies. The authors use a clever technique that more closely resembles give-and-take discussions that typify everyday conversation among acquaintances. Exploiting computer-assisted surveying, the researchers presented random samples of respondents with common counter-arguments to their stated opinions, and a surprising number of respondents changed their positions.

The one area in which this is not the case is affirmative action. Opposing affirmative action policies by roughly a four-to-one margin, whites are obstinate. In fact, in an ingenious part of their study, the authors conduct what they call the “mere mention” experiment. Some respondents were asked about feelings toward African Americans without first being asked about affirmative action. Others were asked first about their feelings toward affirmative action, then toward African Americans. Among the former group, twenty-six percent said African Americans are irresponsible and twenty percent said they are lazy. The “mere mention” of affirmative action, increased those figures to forty-three percent and thirty-one percent, respectively. The authors conclude that opposition to affirmative action does not stem from prejudice, as commonly argued, but that affirmative action is so despised that it actually stokes prejudice.

Not all of the authors’ findings overturn current beliefs about prejudice. Reaffirming the consensus of a generation ago, the authors demonstrate that education does diminish prejudice. Education fosters complex, abstract thought, to which stereotyping and simplistic reasoning are anathema.

More recently, many have argued that the American core values of individualism, competition, and accomplishment promote racist attitudes because they lead to blaming the victims of past

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discrimination. The authors find, however, that most whites who believe in these values find tolerance and egalitarianism to be consonant with them. It is those who favor authoritarian values (emphasizing conformity and obedience) who tend to exhibit intolerance and bigotry.

The Scar of Race is based on data synthesized from two comprehensive, national surveys—the National Election Study and the General Social Survey, both conducted in 1986—with the 1986 Race and Politics Survey of San Francisco Bay Area residents, the nationwide National Race Survey of 1991, and the 1989 Kentucky Survey which covered one county. The consistency of results among all of these surveys support the authors' claims of reliability and validity.

This remarkable book pulls consideration of politics back into the public discourse about race. By clarifying where and to what extent prejudice still lingers in American society, and by showing that such prejudice must be considered separately from attitudes toward governmental policy, Sniderman and Piazza make a crucial contribution to the race and policy discourse. To those who seek to understand prejudice and public policy, and especially to those who hope to act on their understanding, this book will prove invaluable.

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H. Henrietta Stockel. *Women of the Apache Nation: Voices of Truth.* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991) 198 pp., \$24.95.

At a time when books about Native American women need to provide the reader with unromanticized images of strong women in their own right, Stockel's book, *Women of the Apache Nation*, succeeds only partially. The sixty-two page historical introduction and the two shorter introductions to the Mescalero (New Mexico) and Fort Sill (Oklahoma) Apache, while important to situating the women's narratives that follow, are flawed by inaccuracies, overly dependent on secondary sources, and replete with unnecessary references to historical male figures and male relatives. Stockel, for example, incorrectly uses the term "Western Apache" which does not include Mescalero or Fort Sill (cf. Keith Basso, "Western Apache," in *Handbook of North American Indians*. Vol 10. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1983, 462-488). The photos enhance the narrative; a map would have been helpful. The writing is personal, but for this reviewer, overly sentimental.