AFRICAN AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION, WHITE SCHOLARS, AND A NEO-CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL CONTEXT

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Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 307 pages, ISBN 0-691-07071-7, $62.50.

Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 293 pages, ISBN 0-226-47024-5, $55.00.

The central question here is how do White political scientists treat the race variable in public opinion? To explore that question, it is essential that we understand something about the nature of theory building and research design in the discipline. Professor Barbara Geddes in her recent work, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics*, speaks very directly to this question and issue. She clearly indicates that the political context in which the theory building and research design-making is taking place both influences and impacts the intellectual process and product. She writes: "In short, the intuitive, emotional, and ideological appeals of different theories certainly increase their persuasiveness among different groups. When a theory fits with personal experiences, preconceptions, and ideology, (of the era/context) . . . it seems highly plausible. Scholars feel less motivated to go to the trouble of digging up facts to confirm such a congenial theory and, as a result, fail to unearth the facts that would disconfirm it" (Geddes 2003, p. 21). Thus, it should not be surprising that the dominant conservative and neo-conservative ideologies of the current era have influenced how the race variable has been imagined in public opinion.

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In addition to the dominant prevailing ideologies in the political context, there is the matter of the research norms around specific subfields of study like African American politics. Of this research design matter Geddes says: "Stronger research norms in the profession, however, would reduce the effects of ideology on scholarship." And as a consequence of these research norms, scholars "would not so easily be led astray by elegant and ideologically appealing but also, unfortunately, wrong theories" (Geddes 2003, p. 21).

Thus, from Geddes's pathbreaking and long-awaited empirical-based work on theory building and research design we learn the way scholars, many of them White, studying race and public opinion can be mislead and misguided by the prevailing ideologies in the political context, especially if their theories are not checked and if the research norms in this same era and/or subfield are weak or nonexistent. Since this work draws its examples from comparative politics, we can proceed to follow up on her scholarly insights by drawing key examples from the race and public opinion literature. Writing in the conservative era of the 1940s, Gunnar Myrdal had this to say about African American public opinion.

> In the practical and political struggles of effecting changes, the views of white Americans are . . . strategic. The Negro's entire life and consequently his opinions on the Negro problem are in the main to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant majority (Myrdal 1944, p. 1143).

In other words, there was no distinct or independent Black opinion. Rather, Myrdal believed that "these secondary attitudes, being largely defensive responses to white attitudes and actions were relatively superficial responses, not deeply rooted in the individual psyche or in cultural memory and could easily be altered" (Walton and Smith, 2003, p. 58). Clearly, the ideology of segregation in the political context of the 1940s influenced Myrdal's theory building and proposed research design for analyzing the race variables in public opinion. In the end, he privileged White public opinion/attitudes.

Writing in 1985, the era of Reagan conservatism and the growth period of Black conservatives, Professor Linda Lichter declared that the old-line civil rights leaders no longer spoke for the African American masses. From a survey of 600 African Americans, Lichter claimed to have found that the Black masses were now listening to new leaders led by such conservative Blacks as Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, Clarence Thomas, J.A.Y. Parker, Anne Wortham, and Clarence Pendleton. Although no other surveys of the period found such explanations and theories, this White scholar offered supposedly empirical proof. However, the said proof turned out to be badly flawed. Yet, here was an example of how the conservatism of the Reagan era impacted race and public opinion research.

Turning for the moment from examples about the influence of ideology to the matter of research norms in the subfield, Lee Sigelman and Susan Welch analyzed all of the literature on African American public opinion up until their 1994 study and found that "in these leading works on racial attitudes in the United States, black people are conspicuous largely by their absence. These are books about white people, with only a passing glance toward blacks, who inhabit their pages largely as *images* in the minds of whites rather than as *people* in their own right" (Sigelman and Welch, 1994, pp. 1–2).

Sigelman and Welch showed that several White scholars, at least up to 1994, who looked at African American public opinion, actually analyzed White attitudes

about race and passed them off as African American opinion and attitudes. This "research" is misinformation masquerading as factual, empirical, evidence under the rubric and title of something else. Racial public opinion is an area and subfield where the values of precision, careful data gathering, and serious interpretation had no place. One could literally write what one wanted. The research norms so prevalent in the discipline at large could be dropped in this area of investigation. Literally, no research norms for work on race and public opinion existed.

However, additional problems exist on this matter of loose and lax research norms. In the work by Robert Smith and Richard Seltzer, *Contemporary Controversies and the American Racial Divide*, the authors investigated all of the public opinion data sets on foreign affairs and examined them for the number of African Americans asked to respond. In all of these commercial polls and academic surveys including foreign affairs data sets on African Americans, these subsamples were too small to conduct any type of reliable analyses (Smith and Seltzer, 2000, pp. 141–144). But in studies using these data the standards and norms in the discipline about acceptable levels of significance have been systematically dropped and the unreliable results reported anyway. Again, no research norms. Thus, these and numerous other studies provide compelling and persuasive empirical evidence of Geddes's observations that current political context and research norms do impact and influence what some White scholars hold correct not only in the area of comparative politics, but also in the area of race and public opinion. And in the latter area, some of these White scholars have come to develop and accept bad theories, poor research designs, and flawed interpretations dealing with the race variable in public opinion. Usually, these are conservative and neo-conservative White scholars who have substituted sand castles for serious scholarship with reasoned and logical analyses.

Truly, one must be ever aware of these serious weaknesses and limitations when one sees this conservative and neo-conservative White scholarship on African American public opinion. With these central caveats in mind, let us now look at two recent books.

Professor Tali Mendelberg's brilliant book, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (2001), is an outstanding example of how to avoid problems of bad theories, poor research design, selection bias, and the collection of useless data (limited surrogate data which is passed off as a viable substitute) to answer a research question. Mendelberg begins her work with a clear-cut research question and problem, namely, in presidential campaigns, how is the race card played in terms of explicit and implicit messages and symbols? She undertakes a longitudinal, instead of cross-sectional study. This work begins with the first election between the Democratic and Republican parties in 1856 and continues through the 2000 election. This research design allows her to cover the periods when explicit racial messages were made until the era of implicit messages when such examples as the Willie Horton ads began to appear. Furthermore, she uses both individual and experimental data to test and document her findings empirically.

Next, Professor Mendelberg seeks to see if her findings about America hold up in other nations as well. She tests her findings in Germany, looking at the issue of ethnicity there. And she finds that implicit ethnic card messages are effective there as well as in the United States. The finding that political parties use the race card in America and the ethnic card in Germany offers empirical proof for a political reality that transcends nation-states. Such a multiple-nation research design permits her to avoid the ideology inherent in a case study using only the United States. Political parties both here and abroad can play a race and/or ethnic card to improve their chances for winning a presidential election.

Mendelberg's book, winner of the prestigious Woodrow Wilson Award, is not a study of African American public opinion, but rather, is a study of the race variable in presidential campaigns. It embraces the basic research norms in the discipline. Professor Mendelberg's book is a sterling work on the race variable in public opinion and will be the benchmark work for years to come. Future scholars could use this model work as a base to analyze how explicit and implicit race card messages shape and structure African American party behavior, and Latino/a party behavior as well as the party behavior of other racial minorities here and abroad.

Another similar book that avoids the problems so skillfully laid out by Geddes is Professor Taeku Lee's exceptional work, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (2002), which is similar to Mendelberg's work in some ways. However, Lee looks at a different dimension of the race variable in public opinion. He looks at African American public opinion to determine if it is an elite driven phenomenon or a mass driven one. In public opinion scholarship, the dominant theoretical model holds that opinion formation is a top down process. Elites shape the origins, formation, and evolution of opinions and provide the cues, agenda, and direction for opinion in America. The best empirical evidence since the rise of scientific polling and surveys shows that elites through "priming" and "framing" largely determine the political views and attitudes of the mass public. Framing allows elites to state an argument in such a way that it will place emphasis on one consideration and de-emphasize all others. In this manner, mass public opinion is reacting to the wrong issue. On the other hand, priming permits elites to ask questions in such a way that the masses are led to the answers that the elites want. Question wording in this instance stimulates the desired response. Thus, with these two techniques, the elites can cleverly manipulate the masses.

However, Professor Lee is knowledgeable enough about the United States to know that a substantial part of the White public wanted to keep and maintain segregation. Hence, civil rights elite theory runs into a paradox because this theory cannot adequately explain how, if elites are dominant, African American public opinion went in the opposite direction by opposing segregation, mobilizing to eliminate segregation, and by achieving their civil rights despite the solid opposition of some elites who controlled the mass media. Geddes tells us that theories and "paradigms fall because of their own internal contradictions and their inability to deal with the inconvenient facts thrown up by the World" (Geddes 2003, p. 7). Thus, the central problem for Lee's research was how to test this elite theory given the small African American subsamples in existing data sets and the lack of overtime data. How could he study African American opinion without public opinion polling and survey data?

His conceptualization is nothing short of uncommon brilliance and creativity. In fact, one of the reasons that the subfield has languished and invited so many White scholars with loose research norms and standards is the absence of data. When these White scholars are approached about their lack of standards and scholarly values, they immediately point to the huge lack of data problem. Next, they respond by offering what is now the pat excuse by saying that they would have done and would do better if they just had the data. Further, when this shoddy work turns up inappropriate and unusual findings that are bound to be at odds with other empirical work in the subfield, these conservative and neo-conservative opinion scholars respond with their arrogance that they are not of scholarly step. However, in reality what they lacked, and what one finds in Lee's work is imagination and creativity. Lee turned to a different type of data. He used "a sample of 6,765 letters written to the president concerning civil rights and racial equality between 1948 and 1965" (p. 14). With this

data set he created a longitudinal study, an approach that had never been used in this way before. True constituency mail had been used before the rise of mass surveys and polls, but was essentially, though not completely, dropped. Lee resurrected this research technique and used it in a unique and novel manner. And where possible, he used what scattered and limited polling and survey data were available to enhance and enrich his empirical findings and evidence.

With such a large N, Lee was able not only to determine how latent opinion within the African American community was mobilized, but also the different ways in which elite and mass-based movements influenced and shaped African American opinion. The testing of these factors moved the study of the race variable in public opinion in bold and pathbreaking ways. Lee's work is a pioneering study in every aspect of research and theory development, and in the final analysis, this work, like Mendelberg's, respects all of the standards and research norms in the discipline.

Finally, from Lee's innovative research and unique data set, findings poured forth that had never arisen before. Serious empirical established reasons now exist in which to doubt that Myrdal was right in the 1940s and that elite theory was correct about opinion formation and activation, or that group-based public opinion was only a creature of outside sources and elite media communication. Lee's work throws in relief the dominant communication model. Like Mendelberg's work, Lee's book too should have won a whole series of book awards and it is powerful groundwork for greater exploration of African American public opinion.

In these two major groundbreaking studies, we get to see two profoundly different ways that White scholars can analyze the race variable in public opinion research. Clearly, we are intellectually richer because of these works, and we now know that sloppy research norms and ideologically based studies will be seen for what they are, fruitless and unusable and pretentious scholarship (Walton et al., 2001).

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