Who's invited to the (political) party: race and party politics in the USA

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Guest Editorial

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ABSTRACT
From the political behemoths of the Democratic and Republican Parties, to the Civil Rights Era racially progressive Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and reactionary American Independent Party, to the contemporary third party Green and Libertarian Parties, party politics in the USA has a long and storied relationship to the reproduction and contestation of racial domination. Recent works illuminate the strategic use of racial discourse by major party political elites, their deployment of racialized political platforms, and the relationship of these phenomena to power dynamics and racial interests but have yet to fully move beyond the two-party system and engage with innovations in political and cultural sociology. We outline openings for an empirically-grounded sociology of political parties that would reveal the micro- and meso-level features of racialized party politics and the operations of discursive and performative power within both major and minor political parties.

Introduction

The infamous US politician, George Wallace, after unsuccessfully running for President in 1968 under the American Independent Party on a campaign meant to appeal to 'white backlash' to the Civil Rights Movement, supposedly stated to a reporter, 'I tried to talk about good roads and good schools and all these things that have been part of my career, and nobody listened. And then I began talking about niggers, and they stomped the floor' (PBS 2000). In Britain, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) recently faced criticism for its opposition to Britain's racial discrimination laws (Farage 2015). Its founder, Sked (2015) stated, 'I created a monster. … UKIP has become a vehicle of the far-right, obsessed with race and immigration.' And in the contemporary USA, the Tea Party has been plagued by charges of racism – from racist placards at rallies to research indicating supporters of the overwhelmingly

white party are twenty-five per cent more likely to be racially resentful toward people of colour than non-supporters (Parker and Boretto 2013). Even beyond the US two party system, party politics appear to rely upon and even gestate racialized attitudes and discourses. But what more do sociologists have to say about race and political parties?

In the 1980s and 1990s, the sociological sub-field field of racial politics began to gain recognition in the wake of key scholarship, such as Omi and Winant's (1986) *Racial Formation in the United States* and Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo's (1999) *Racialized Politics*. Drawing on these works and insights from luminaries including W.E.B. Du Bois, Max Weber, Robert E. Park, Gunnar Myrdal, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy, a corpus of work demonstrates the pervasiveness of racial politics, sociopolitical dynamics such as racial-political realignment and symbolic racism, and the role of the state and political sphere in the construction, reproduction, and contestation of dominant racial meanings and structures.

Despite the fact that classical sociologists saw political parties as foundational aspects of social life, sociology has 'largely abandoned the study of parties to political scientists' (Mudge and Chen 2014, 306) for much of the past fifty years. However, the majority of political science research on race and political parties employs public opinion surveys and social-psychological experiments to examine correlations between race, partisanship, and voting behaviour (cf. Hutchings and Valentino 2004). Thus, we currently know much more about the role of outcomes and attitudes than the social processes that guide and construct those attitudes and outcomes. In order to fill this gap, there is need for further development of an empirically-grounded, micro- and meso-level sociology of political parties that elucidates how they operate within what Bonilla-Silva (1997) aptly describes as a 'racialized social system'.

Recent groundbreaking studies illuminate the connection between party politics and racial oppression and the strategic use of racial discourses and biases by Democratic and Republican elites (cf. Feagin 2012; Haney López 2014; Hughey and Parks 2014; McAdam and Kloos 2014; Walters 2003). Simultaneously, a 'distinctively practice-oriented, cultural sociology of parties' has taken shape and focused on how 'parties produce, shape, and reshape shared meanings over time' and 'use symbols and cultural products to achieve political ends' (Mudge and Chen 2014, 323). However, these emergent lines of inquiry, focusing on racism and oppression on the one hand, and cultural processes on the other, have yet to fully engage one another. Resultantly, the sociological study of race and politics holds a potent, yet unfulfilled, promise; it sits on the cusp of illuminating how meaning and power structure pathways of racialized action, particularly beyond the two major parties in the USA.

Race and major party politics

While there is a long history of racial politics for major US political parties, a number of factors cemented the alignment of the Republican and Democratic Party with their current racial bases and politics in the early to mid-1960s: the Civil Rights Movement's support for Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater's use of coded racial appeals, and notorious civil rights opponent Strom Thurmond joining the Republican Party (Hughey and Parks 2014). Due to the importance of these dynamics in shaping contemporary politics, much has been written about the 'racial realignment' in which the Democratic Party gained support from a multiracial progressive coalition while the Republican Party became the party of 'white backlash' (cf. Carmines and Stimson 1989; Hughey 2014; Hughey and Parks 2014; McAdam 2015).

Symbolic racism theory, arguably the most influential recent theory of race and political behaviour, posits that post-Civil Rights era white racism is 'a form of resistance to change in the racial status quo based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline' (Kinder and Sears 1981, 416). Kinder and Sears (1981) found that politically channelled opposition to black social progress does not come from a legitimate or objective perception of a loss of status or resources for whites, but rather from anti-black stereotypes and abstract social psychological dispositions.

Further research has demonstrated and complicated understandings of the ways in which political elites in the USA engage symbolic racism. The use of racialized discourses by major party politicians has been a particularly fruitful area of inquiry. Haney López (2014) argues that especially Republican, but also Democratic, politicians use coded racial appeals or 'dog whistles' to gain votes from whites while enacting public policies that exacerbate inequality and benefit elites and that these discursive practices constitute 'strategic racism' or 'purposeful efforts to use racial animus as leverage to gain material wealth, political power, or heightened social standing' (46).

Walters (2003) examines the issue of race and political party from a tripartite paradigm of discourse, interests, and policy. He argues that since the 1980s Reagan era and fully culminating in the 2000 election, there has existed a political project from the far right of the Republican Party toward developing a white nationalist politics that targets the black community. Within this political project, white interests are advanced as national interests and thus policies geared toward racial equality are framed as threats to white *qua* national interests in a supposed 'zero-sum' context of racial competition. Walters further argues that black conservatives have served to legitimate the racial implications of this politics as 'colourblind'.

In their analysis of the discursive strategies employed by the Republican Party, Hughey and Parks (2014) focus on and contextualize the contemporary racialization and "'othering'" of President Obama. Given the extreme reactions of Republicans and the Tea Party to Obama's election and presidency, Hughey and Parks (2014, 5) examine the "'ways political movements both rely upon and reproduce racist imagery, representations, and symbols (such as apes, witch doctors, fried chicken, watermelons, etc.) under the pretense that their cause is racially neutral or even color-blind' (5). In particular, they note that Republican Party language usage reconstructs whiteness as simultaneously imbued with a sense of victimhood, citizenship, authority, and morality. They further connect the phenomena of racially coded language among the Republican Party to the field of cultural production by drawing into focus the increasingly prominent role of mass media discourses and imagery in political campaigns.

Aside from President Obama's symbolic significance for Republicans, sociologists have also examined the racial implications of his symbolic status for Democrats and the wider society. Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues that President Obama serves to validate core notions of colourblind racial ideology and that the election of a nonwhite president closes off discussions of racial justice and contributes to the illusion of America as a 'post-racial' nation, where racism and inequality are no longer systemic and pervasive issues. Feagin (2012) and Moore and Bell (2010) have also shown how President Obama's election illustrates the resonance of his rhetoric and image with the 'white racial frame'. Interestingly, both hypotheses have found evidence in recent social psychological research. Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009) find that endorsing Obama allows whites to feel less guilty about engaging in laissez-faire racism and Kaiser et al. (2009) find that President Obama's election reduces perceptions of America's need for further racial, social, and economic justice reforms.

Haney López (2014) argues that the deployment of colourblind racial discourses by liberal and progressive politicians gives credence to 'dog whistle' claims because it leaves racial insinuations unchallenged as colourblind racial ideology rests on myths about fairness and discrimination that enable 'dog whistle' politics to resonate. On the strategic use of colourblind racial discourse by Democrats, Feagin (2012) notes that due to the overwhelming racial disparities in political power, President Obama would risk losing power and legitimacy by commenting on racialized attacks from Republicans or speaking openly and critically about systemic racism. McAdam and Kloos (2014) point out that the high levels of racialized contention and polarization during the Obama presidency has caused unprecedented government dysfunction and an inability to address pressing issues.

While much ink has been spilled in the investigation of racialized policies, interests, and discourses in terms of the two major parties in the USA, third

parties have long been a feature of racialized political contestations that, puzzlingly, remain relatively underexplored as sites of sociological analysis of race and politics.

Third parties and racial politics

Along with the Democratic and Republican parties, third-party politics in the USA have historically been vehicles for diverse and strategic racialized interests ranging from white supremacy to liberation for people of colour (cf. Ali 2008; Gillespie 2012). Gillespie (2012) writes that third parties have often 'embraced and pushed for – sometimes they even found their reason to exist in – issue positions that have been vital to the liberation of excluded or marginalized groups' (154). For instance, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, formed in 1964 by organizations within the Civil Rights Movement, existed for the sole purpose of challenging the white supremacist politics of the Mississippi Democratic Party and enabling the political participation of blacks and promotion of their interests (Gillespie 2012; McAdam 2015). At the same time, third parties have been organized on the basis of white supremacist identities and policies such as Wallace's pro-segregationist American Independent Party and the Constitution Party's platform of cutting government spending, both of which have employed coded racial appeals (Gillespie 2012).

Third parties in the USA matter because they straddle the line between social movements and traditional political parties. The historical and contemporary features of third parties illustrate their important positionality as sites of micropolitical processes such as deliberation in which racial dynamics influence inclusion and participation and as organizations that can influence policy agendas and outcomes relating to racial inequality through the 'spoiler effect' and throwing support behind major party candidates.

While many previous third parties organized conspicuously around racial issues, the largest third parties in the USA, such as the Libertarian Party and the Green Party, are seemingly founded on ostensibly nonracial principles of liberty and environmentalism. However, they advance racialized political projects as exemplified by national platforms that differ widely in their framing of and prescribed socio-political approaches to racial issues. The Libertarian Party platform draws on principles of classical liberalism to argue that while private institutions have the freedom to discriminate based on race, individuals also have the freedom to demonstrate and boycott. In contrast, the Green Party platform includes calls for reparations to the African American community and increased political leadership for people of colour. Understanding how such ideals and approaches shape and relate to the actual speech and action of third-party participants and leaders warrants deeper inquiry.

Unexplored terrains of racial and party politics

More research is needed on the micropolitics of race and discursive and performative power in interactions within political parties and the racial dynamics of third-party politics. Koch (2003), in his study of the causes of third-party support, concludes, 'major third party candidacies shape supporters' political orientations and concerns in much the same manner as the major political parties do' (48). It is therefore important to understand how individuals construct identities in the context of third-party political groups organized around nonracial principles yet committed to racial politics. As noted by Shafer (1986), an ethnographic approach to political parties can provide essential insights into dimensions of society and social life such as power and political participation that no other types of study can provide.

Many important sociological works demonstrate the significance of political participation and practices in the maintenance and alteration of racial disparities in the distribution of symbolic and material resources. Studies of social movements, political deliberation, and civic organizations reveal that groups and organizations often unintentionally reproduce inequalities, strategically employ racial discourse, silence marginalized individuals, and struggle in actualizing ideals of racial equality (e.g. Beeman 2015; Hughey 2015; Mendelberg and Oleske 2000). Understanding how these issues might operate within political parties would help illuminate the reproduction of racial inequality within and through the political sphere. There is thus a need for sociological analysis of the racial dynamics of political parties, including ethnographies that examine the internal social structures of political parties and their relationship to social processes in wider society (cf. Mudge and Chen 2014).

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