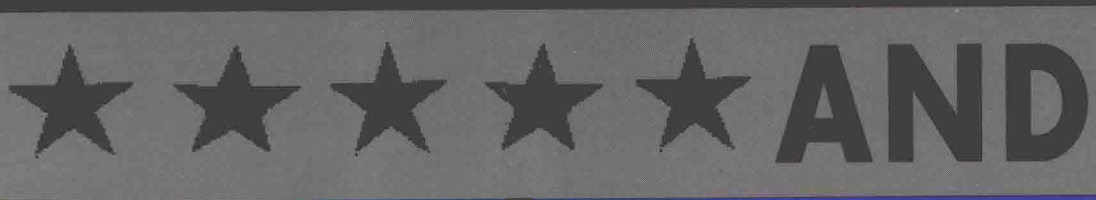
PREJUDICE POLITICS AND THE AMERICAN DILEMMA



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STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California
© 1993 by the Board of Trustees of the
Leland Stanford Junior University
Printed in the United States of America

CIP data appear at the end of the book

Original printing 1993
Last figure below indicates year of this printing:
03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96 95 94

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By way of friendship

to
William S. Berland
Reverend Al Carmines
Barbara Mellers

Acknowledgments

Some subjects are risky to discuss at universities nowadays, and race is surely among them. An awareness of the volatility of issues of race makes us all the more appreciative of the support and assistance extended to us, initially in funding the conference from which this book proceeded, and subsequently in facilitating the preparation of the manuscript itself.

The conference itself was sponsored by three research units of the University of California at Berkeley—the Survey Research Center (Percy Tannenbaum, director), the Institute of Personality and Social Research (Philip Tetlock, director), and the Institute of Human Development (Joseph Campos, director). In addition, the Graduate Division (Joseph Cerny, provost for research) generously assisted in preparation of the manuscript.

Our institutional debts to one side, our personal ones are sixfold. Lynn Geske-Morgan has been indispensable, at every step, from arrangements for the initial conference through preparation of the manuscript: we are immensely indebted to her acuity, thoroughness, and executive abilities. Lani Kask has played an essential supervisory role, the more crucial since the three editors are distributed over three universities. James Tedder has been of invaluable aid in supervising both the copy-editing and the correction of the galley proofs. Gordon R. Lawrence had the unfairly burdensome—and apart from this mention, entirely thankless—task of preparing the Bibliography. In getting the manuscript on paper, Maria del Carmen Torralba was a delight to work with: smart, speedy, and buoyant. Finally, Randall S. Peterson has proven to be a specially valuable colleague: quite apart from the exceptional role he played in preparing Chapter 9, of which he is a co-author, he has been of invaluable assistance in preparing all the other chapters, for which he should be recognized as at least an honorary co-author.

P.M.S., P.E.T., E.G.C.

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Prejudice, Politics, and the American Dilemma

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1

Prejudice and Politics: An Introduction

Paul M. Sniderman, Philip E. Tetlock, and Edward G. Carmines

There was a moment, perhaps in the summer of 1963 when Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke in Washington, D.C., when it seemed as if the American dilemma might be resolved. Not immediately, certainly not totally, but substantially resolved and within the lifetime of the children of the men and women, black and white, who had peacefully paraded up Pennsylvania Avenue and formed a sea of hundreds of thousands to listen to King tell of a dream.

The optimism born of the civil rights movement of the 1960's has long since died. Looking back, our perspective foreshortened by three decades, we may think the death followed almost immediately upon the birth. The mid 1960's witnessed landmark civil rights legislation, passed through Congress by confident majorities and signed into law by a committed president; the late 1960's saw riots in Watts, tanks rumbling down the streets of Detroit, cries of black power and separatist politics.

Or perhaps the death of optimism was later, not in the 1960's but in the 1970's, with the emergence of affirmative action signaling the eclipse of hope. Notice that in speaking this way, we do not have in mind the arguments now familiarly deployed against affirmative action, but rather those advanced in its favor. In a favored analogy of the day, President Lyndon Johnson likened blacks to a sprinter who had had his chains miraculously removed, after having been hobbled all his life, and who was then told, "Run, you are free to compete." The handicap was too great. The race had already started. Too much ground had to be made up. In short, the argument on behalf of affirmative action amounts to a confession: if American society and economy are left to their natural mode of operation, the American dilemma will never be resolved.

Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) has shaped the thinking

of thoughtful observers about the issue of race for nearly half a century; or, more accurately, since the work itself is multifaceted and complex, a certain reading of it has become part of the intellectual furniture of informed citizens. That reading finds its purest expression in a deservedly famous passage from Myrdal's introduction. He writes:

> *The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. . . . The "American Dilemma," referred to in the title of this book, is the ever-raging conflict between, on the one hand, the valuations preserved on the general plane which we shall call the "American Creed," where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific planes of individual and group living, where personal and local interests; economic, social, and sexual jealousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people; and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habits dominate his outlook.* (xlvii; italics in original)

This formulation of the American dilemma has become ritualized; so much so, we are persuaded, that it now obscures as much as summarizes the contemporary politics of race: the very belief that we understand what is before us has become an obstacle to our understanding.

If you wish to see how Myrdal's formulation has become an intellectual icon, obstructing rather than assisting an understanding of the politics of race, it is necessary only to stop and consider what a dilemma actually is. A dilemma consists in the unavoidability of choosing either between a good and a good, or between an evil and an evil. Dilemmas are morally excruciating precisely because they require either the acceptance of a wrong or the sacrifice of a good. But what does Myrdal's dilemma require a choice between? On the one side, "liberty, equality, justice and fair opportunity for everybody"; on the other, prejudice, economic advantage, and the force of custom. This may be a political conflict; it is hardly a moral dilemma.

And the cleavage between the politics of race a half century ago, when Myrdal wrote, and now is precisely that race has become a dilemma—a genuine dilemma, an achingly difficult dilemma. The choice is no longer between right and wrong, between the values of the American creed and a ragbag of irrational and self-serving beliefs: the choice now must be made among competing values—including compassion, the freedom to achieve, tolerance, the right to be judged on one's individual merits, the reach of the state, and the autonomy of the family—in a word, among the very values that have made up the American creed. This is not at all to suggest that prejudice and self-interest have disappeared: they remain potent forces. But issues of race no longer turn on the normatively one-sided axis that Myrdal memorialized. There is now a complexity of causality—hence an ambiguity of responsibility—that has become the signature of the contemporary politics of race.

No less fundamentally, Myrdal supposed that issues of race at the deepest level pivoted on a conflict in the minds of Americans—that is, in the minds of white Americans. From his point of view, what therefore required understanding was what white Americans believe and how they behave toward blacks, not what blacks themselves believe and do.

In contrast, we want to suggest that there has been a doubling of the American dilemma. Issues of race now are two-sided, and neither their difficulty nor their poignancy can rightly be gauged unless they are viewed not only from the perspectives of whites but also from those of blacks. We recognize, we should say at once, that our formulation of the American dilemma as two-sided is itself an oversimplification. For it implies that participants can be sorted into white and black only. In fact, there is a crucial need to appreciate and respect the diversity of racial politics in contemporary American society, and in particular, the tensions, as well as affinities, among the variety of minorities. Nor, in insisting on the need for at least a duality of perspectives, are we suggesting that the black understanding of issues of race has nothing to do with the white, or vice versa. All the same, we are suggesting—and about this we feel strongly—that race is no longer just a white man's problem, as Myrdal maintained. It is as necessary to take into account the experiences, attitudes, fears, hopes, difficulties, and prejudices of blacks as of whites.

It has been a half century since Myrdal wrote, a quarter century since the landmark civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965. An effort must be made to understand issues of race as they are now, not as they were a generation or more ago.

But how, concretely, is this to be done? The studies we have gathered together contribute, we believe, to a fresh understanding of prejudice, politics, and the American dilemma. They do not represent the last word in the answers that can be developed, but they do present fresh lines of questions and, what is more, deliberately interleaf two perspectives—the first taking up issues of race focusing on whites, the second on blacks.[1] But viewed from either perspective, our objective is to see anew the American dilemma.

Organization of the Book

The studies brought together in this book cover much territory—the use of group stereotypes by college students, the behavioral assessment of tolerance, cohort trends in stereotypes of blacks, the use by blacks of

[1] The two are by no means equally developed, not because we do not believe they are equally important, but because the reservoir of data and expertise available for an account of race focusing on whites is deeper than for blacks.

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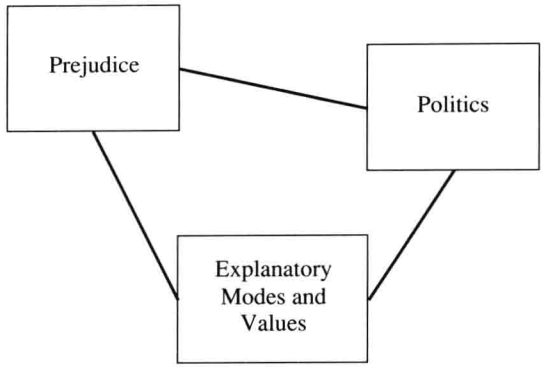

Fig. 1.1. Schematic outline.

stereotypes, explanations of inequality, the constraints on the reactions of blacks to middle-class American values, the politics of election campaigns, the bases of American thinking about racial policies—to give only a selective listing of the topics covered. Moreover, judged in terms, not of what is written about, but rather of who is doing the writing, this book represents a congregation of social sciences with more than the usual number of pews occupied by at least one representative,[2] including psychometricians, social and personality psychologists, sociologists, population demographers, and political scientists of several persuasions. This range of both substantive focus and disciplinary perspective seems to us valuable—indeed essential—if the complexity of issues of race is to be appreciated and respected. But of course this is obvious, and raises at once a companion question: given the range and diversity of the studies in this volume, what ties them together? And it is this question—of organization and coherence—that we want to concentrate on here.

Ironically, notwithstanding the diversity of the studies in this book, we want to emphasize that they are tailored, with one exception, to fit a specific analytic framework, set out in Figure 1.1.

Prejudice

Our point of departure is prejudice itself. For getting a fresh understanding of issues of race must begin, we are persuaded, by considering what, exactly, prejudice is.

This may sound like an odd question: surely everyone knows what

[2] The largest exception is economics and race, which we set aside because of the appearance of Schulman and Darity 1989, which is devoted exclusively to it.

prejudice is. Prejudice is, for instance, judging a black man to be lazy, not because you know anything about his personal qualities, but simply on the grounds of his skin color; equivalently but more generally, prejudice is reacting negatively to a person, not in response to individual qualities, but in reaction to his or her group membership. If anything at all is clear, nearly half a century having passed since publication of the two landmark studies of prejudice in America, Gunnar Myrdal's *The American Dilemma* and Theodore Adorno and his colleagues' *The Authoritarian Personality*, you would suppose it to be the meaning of *prejudice*. Surely that, at least, we know.

And the meaning of *prejudice* does seem obvious. What is in need of understanding is why some people accept ideas about others that are patently absurd: the anti-Semite, wild generalizations about Jews; the racial bigot, slanderous attributions to blacks. Prejudice thus centers on the acceptance of negative stereotypes about groups, and the companion question of how to combat prejudice accordingly centers on how to impeach beliefs that are simultaneously overgeneralized and oversimplified.

Prejudice, so construed, presents itself as a form of archaic thinking. But there has been a revolution in the psychology of social cognition, which has turned this view of prejudice, if not upside down, then inside out. The implications of this revolution are laid out in detail in Chapter 2 by Myron Rothbart and Oliver John, but the broader argument deserves to be set out here.

The revolutionary fulcrum is Henri Tajfel's work with "minimal groups" (1970). The experiment runs as follows. Dots are projected onto a screen for brief periods of time. Each subject is asked to estimate the number of dots for each slide; subsequently, the subjects are told, on an entirely random basis, that they have either underestimated or overestimated the number of dots. When they were then asked to allocate rewards to two other people, about whom the subjects knew only that one had counted the dots the way they had and the other had counted them differently, it was found that subjects systematically favored the person supposedly like them at the expense of the person ostensibly unlike them.

Here are "minimal groups" indeed. The subject shares no physical features with the other person; no cultural values; no similarities in belief, background, or prior experience—nothing to bind; equally, nothing to divide. Yet the heart of the problem of prejudice—double standards toward ingroup and outgroup—is nonetheless reproduced. It is possible to induce people systematically to favor one group over another given only a flimsy (and fictitious) basis for identification with one rather than the other. Tajfel's minimal-group experiment thus demonstrates vividly that the threshold of prejudice is low indeed.

There is a second, and no less discouraging, lesson taught by the psychology of social cognition. Employment of stereotypes was once supposed (e.g., in Lippmann 1922) to be, on the face of it, proof of simplemindedness. But stereotypes are not necessarily irrational. On the contrary, making use of them often assists inference, and stereotypes are, in any event, in the words of Roger W. Brown, "natural categories, an intrinsic essential and primitive aspect of cognition, and anyone who attempts to 'jawbone' natural categories out of existence has chosen not just an ineffective means but also an end whose realization would be disastrous" (1986: 587–88).

But where exactly does that leave the study of prejudice? Surely it does not follow that the indiscriminate stereotyping of blacks is to be passed off as an incidental, if regrettable, by-product of a natural and rational tendency to take advantage of all the information given? How, in any case, are natural and rational forms of categorization to be distinguished from "unnatural" and "irrational" ones?

From our perspective, the contribution of Rothbart and John in Chapter 2 is precisely to drive home how radical the questions that need to be asked about stereotypes and prejudice are. And the place to begin, which they modestly decline to stress, is their pioneering development of an instrument for the study of the incidence and stability of racial stereotypes.

It is only natural to assume, a quarter of a century after the civil rights movement reorganized the U.S. political party system itself (Carmines and Stimson 1989), that there must be libraries chock-full of studies documenting the frequency with which negative stereotypes of blacks are endorsed. There are, after all, series of opinion surveys of the country as a whole, conducted regularly on an annual and a biannual basis over the past thirty years or more, charting popular support for the principles of racial equality and policies designed to realize it. But however rich the harvest of information on other points these surveys yield, in terms of mapping the incidence and stability of racial stereotypes, their contribution is meager.

It is hard to credit this—certainly, we found it so—but not the least merit of Rothbart and John's Chapter 2 is that it convincingly shows just how flimsy the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study of racial stereotypes are. It must—or at any rate should—come as a shock to discover that the paradigmatic study of racial stereotypes is a study done in the 1950's, and that changes in the frequency and salience of such stereotypes over the past quarter century have been measured against a baseline of Princeton undergraduates.

Without minimizing the originality or value of the original study by D. Katz and K. W. Braly (1933), Rothbart and John deftly delineate the limitations of the Katz measurement procedure. Nor is theirs a merely

negative project. For in addition to supplying a critique of previous measures of group stereotypes, they present an instrument of their own, offering illustrations of its value by drawing on their own uniquely designed study of the dynamics of stereotypes through an undergraduate experience. The procedure Rothbart and John have devised deserves to be publicized, we are persuaded, because it makes possible the resolution of key questions about the connections between prejudice and politics in the contemporary United States.

A still more radical cut at conceptualizing prejudice is offered, in Chapter 3, by Harrison Gough and Pamela Bradley. Their approach deserves to be set out with care, since if their initial results are to be credited, they have not only hit upon a different way to measure prejudice but have also made progress on a quite different way to account for it. Measures of prejudice, they observe, have been of one logical type—self-report. The most famous is the F scale. A set of statements is presented to people. Agreement with a statement is a sign of prejudice: the more statements a person agrees with, the more prejudiced he or she is. The F scale has classically included statements such as:

> No weakness or difficulty can hold us back if we have enough willpower.
>
> Sex crimes, such as rapes and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment; such criminals ought to be publicly whipped, or worse.
>
> People can be divided into two distinct classes—the weak and the strong.
>
> Much of our lives is controlled by plots hatched in secret places.
>
> Reading the stars can tell us a great deal about the future.

Such statements are marked by harsh and intemperate language; superstitious thinking; a tendency to reduce experience to dichotomies rather than recognize its complexity; and the expression of extreme sentiments, particularly of hostility and aggression. It takes little imagination to anticipate that some people will decline to agree with these statements. They may reject them because of reluctance to agree with assertions that are overly broad, whatever their content; or because they believe agreement would present an unflattering image of themselves. But in either case a subset of people who are in fact intolerant will decline to agree with expressions of intolerance, creating, in Gough and Bradley's terms, a problem of "false negatives."

The problem of false negatives has long bedeviled researchers of tolerance. Incontrovertibly, some people who are intolerant will refrain from

responding to expressions of intolerance. But it has proven quite impossible to get agreement on either the proportion of false negatives or the risk of giving a false account of prejudice as a result of failing to classify false negatives correctly.

The difficulties appear intractable so long as the measure of prejudice relies on self-report: for however subtle the questions, and however complex the statistical analysis, the strategy relies on self-disclosure: to be classified as such, people must voluntarily confess themselves to be prejudiced. And it is against the limits of self-incriminatory measures that the originality of Gough and Bradley's proposal deserves to be measured.

Briefly, they propose that a person's degree of tolerance should be assessed, not in terms of what he or she is willing to report about himself to a stranger (namely, an interviewer), but rather on the basis of how tolerant he or she is judged to be by a well-acquainted third party.

In assessing Gough and Bradley's approach, we think it useful to distinguish between the larger strategy they propose and the specific tactics they have deployed to implement it. Methods are not useful or useless in themselves, only useful in varying degrees in illuminating how things work in reality. Judged by this standard, the results that Gough and Bradley report are potentially the key to a new understanding of the etiology of prejudice.

Of the manifold of relations that Gough and Bradley explore, a crucial subset concerns intellectual efficiency. Intellectual efficiency is assessed by a scale, specifically tailored for the job, included in the California Psychological Inventory (Gough 1987). Consider the pattern of differential correlations between the intellectual efficiency (Ie) scale and intolerance measured by self-report on the one hand and behaviorally on the other. The correlation between the Ie scale and the F scale is $-.42$; between the Ie scale and observer-judged intolerance, $-.16$. Parallel results, moreover, were observed for 82 of the spouses who took the College Vocabulary Test: the correlation between the Vocabulary Test and observer-judged intolerance is .02, between the Vocabulary Test and self-report intolerance, .22.

Why are these findings so important? Because they potentially cut the ground from under one of the leading explanations of prejudice. This explanation, advanced by many,[3] but most cogently and systematically by Gertrude Selznick and Stephen Steinberg (1969), holds that formal education is a primary social institution for reducing prejudice. The argument

[3] We should declare an interest: two of us have been proponents of the Selznick-Steinberg position (see, e.g., Sniderman, Tetlock, Glaser, Green, and Hout 1989); if a more generalized version of the Gough-Bradley argument holds up, we shall have to acknowledge that a major theme in our analysis of democratic politics—that education tends to foster principled support for democratic values—is mistaken.

runs as follows. The fewer years of formal education people have, the more impoverished the fund of broad information they have to draw on, and the more imperfectly developed their cognitive skills for analyzing the information at hand. In turn, the less information they have to draw on, and the less their capacity to analyze it, the less likely they are to recognize that intolerant ideas and sentiments, albeit popular, conflict with the official values of U.S. culture; and the less aware they are of such conflict, the less reluctant they will be to accept intolerant ideas and sentiments. Insofar as Selznick and Steinberg are correct, then, it follows that education genuinely combats a susceptibility to prejudice.

Gough and Bradley do not themselves discuss the role of education,[4] but one implication of their analysis reinforces a more skeptical account of the impact of schooling. As Mary Jackman in particular has argued (1978, 1981), education may only give the appearance of combatting prejudice. As she maintains, the better-educated chiefly have the advantage of having learned what it is appropriate to say—and what not to say. Jackman's critique thus draws support from the Gough-Bradley analysis at two levels. First, the Gough-Bradley critique of self-report measures of tolerance provides a proper psychometric rationale for skepticism, as against mere suspicion of insincerity. Second, the Gough-Bradley finding of divergent patterns of correlation between self-reported and behaviorally assessed intolerance and intellectual efficiency contributes a new piece of evidence substantially increasing the plausibility of Jackman's broader speculations.

For the record, we want to declare an interest in this issue. In some of our own work (e.g., Sniderman, Brody, and Kuklinski 1984; Sniderman, Tetlock, Glaser, Green, and Hout 1989; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991), we have argued for the Selznick-Steinberg position. Although in assembling this volume our objective was to identify fresh lines of questioning, we had not anticipated that it would be our own work, along with others, that would be seen to need reexamination. For our part, the correct judgment to make now is not that Jackman's position has been shown to be correct—a complete linkage between the Gough-Bradley findings and her position is far from having been established—but rather that it has received a new lease on life and deserves to be considered a scientifically plausible possibility. However this may be, thanks to Gough and Bradley's contribution to this volume in Chapter 3, we are ourselves the beneficiaries of a stimulus to fresh thinking, albeit not quite in the way we had anticipated.

[4] It is worth reiterating that it is we, not Gough and Bradley, who are drawing a connection between their findings and the role of education in fostering tolerance.

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