

Interpretive Political Science and the Social Construction of Race¹

by

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“Everybody knows” that races do not exist in nature, that they are social constructs derived from the human imagination and replicated through human discourse and institutions. With the notable exception of Stephen Colbert’s character on the Comedy Channel’s *The Colbert Report* (2005-2014), “everybody” in the USA also uses racial identities on a daily basis to mark distinctions between people, to make sense of innumerable quotidian social phenomena, to make political estimations, and much, much more. The aim of this paper is to try to make sense of racial politics in the United States in the face of this contradictory reality, and more particularly to outline the role of interpretive political science in doing so. The argument of the paper is that if race is a social construct, then there is no escape from taking an interpretive approach to studying the role of race in political life. A sub-text argument, to be developed more fully in work that builds on this paper, is that behavioralist² political science is an insufficient and incomplete path to political understanding when it comes to racial politics in the United States.

That racial identities are important in U.S. politics should not be a controversial claim in the year 2016. Racial identity remains one of the most powerful fault lines in U.S.

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² A note on terminology: there are several terms that might be used to identify the approach to political knowledge that I am referencing here: positivist, scientific, behaviorist. Each of them has strengths and drawbacks, but the idea is that political science should try to replicate the methods of the natural sciences in order to discover factual truths about political life. I will use “behavioralist” in this essay.

electoral politics, and studies continue to mount demonstrating the increasing correlation between racial and partisan identity, as well as its powerful role in shaping electoral behavior. National presidential election exit poll data from 2012 indicated that nearly sixty percent of white voters cast their ballots for Romney, while only 6% of black voters, 26% of Asian voters, and 27% of Latino voters did. Put differently, Romney collected some 88% of his votes from white voters while Obama received 56% of his votes from white voters (New York Times, 2012). The Associated Press, meanwhile, reported that in the 2014 midterm elections, the shift of white voters away from Democratic candidates was even more pronounced (Associated Press, 2014). And beyond voting, there is a wide array of evidence accumulating indicating that Americans' racial identities play a powerful role in shaping their attitudes toward government in general, and toward public policy issues in particular (Porter, 2016).

1. "Behavioralism" and "Interpretivism" – an Introductory Sketch.

What does it mean that racial identities – figments of our collective imagination – continue to play such an enormous role in American political life? How are we to make sense of this long-term and troubling reality? In response to this second question, since this project aims to systematically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of *interpretive* versus *behavioralist* approaches to political understanding, I will begin this essay with a brief overview of my understanding of these two methodological commitments.

Behavioralist approaches to political knowledge, those aimed at making political science a "real" science along the lines of the natural sciences, have been methodologically dominant within the political science sub-field of American politics for at least a half century. Its central ideas are that the pursuit of genuine knowledge involves identifying and maintaining a strict separation of "facts" and "values," and that genuine knowledge is based on facts alone. Facts are identified through observations, preferably measurable observations, that can be replicated by others and are inter-subjectively transmissible.³

The methods of science aim at *explaining* political facts and they do so by asking – and trying to answer – questions about *cause* and *effect* in order to uncover and verify objective

³ That is, my facts can be demonstrated to you so that your identification of those facts is the same as mine.

truths about what makes political phenomena as they are. Drawing on theories of cause and effect that build on previous research, political scientists formulate hypotheses regarding the effects (on dependent variables) of specifically identified causes (independent variables), and test their validity by measuring their research data against the hypothesized causal relationships. This process can lead, in turn, to support or refinements (and sometimes rejection) of the theories that inform the research work. Through these replicable steps of scientific research and analysis, verified knowledge of political reality is built step-by-step by the scientific community.

Underlying these behaviorist research efforts are some basic assumptions that are important to make explicit in the context of this project. The first basic assumption is that understanding cause and effect relationships between observable facts is the foundation for all genuine knowledge. Questions that cannot be formulated as inquiries into cause and effect in regard to observable facts are questions that cannot be addressed with scientific precision, and therefore cannot be verified objectively. And claims made about reality that cannot be identified in the form of observable facts cannot count as knowledge. The strict separation of facts and values also implies an ontology in which the “knower” stands outside, and apart from, the “known.” The political reality that we hope to understand is presumed to be “out there,” unconnected to us and existing without our involvement, and its truths and the law-like regularities explaining its facts can be “discovered” or “uncovered” through carefully following the verifiable and replicable steps of the scientific method. Put simply, our work as political scientists involves accurately describing and explaining *other people's* political behavior, from the outside. Our work as political scientists, then, is not to *create* political meanings, or even to raise *political* questions about the reality we are studying, but rather to ask *scientific* questions leading us to find and verify explanations for the cause and effect relationships that are assumed to exist “out there” in the political world quite apart from our active involvement as political beings or meaning makers.

In contrast to this dominant approach to the study of racial politics in the United States is an *interpretive* approach that takes questions of *meaning* and *significance* as its central foci of inquiry. Rather than positing and testing hypotheses in the form of “if . . . , then. . .” causality, interpretive analysts ask if there might be some important *political*

meaning or significance to some political event or phenomenon that could benefit from further clarification or that has been overlooked by others, and they ask as well why we should care about it. Interpretive scholars see themselves as *inquiring political subjects* trying to “make sense” (Taylor 1971) of complex social phenomena to which they are inevitably connected and for whom the political stakes can never be completely distanced from the inquiry. While cause-and-effect information might be highly useful and illuminating from this point of view, it cannot begin to answer the whole range of questions about political life that interpretive scholars think it important and meaningful to ask. Most important to interpretive inquiry is that we are inevitably embedded in webs of political relationships that shape the lives we live, so that students of politics want to know what a political phenomenon *means for us* collectively and individually. And more particularly, since politics exists at the conflict-prone intersection of our necessary interdependence and our equally inescapable differences, interpretive analysts want to know what political phenomena *mean for whom*, and *what the stakes are for whom*. More prosaically, what difference does it make, for whom, that a political phenomenon reinforces certain qualities of relationship and not others, certain institutional structures and not others, and generates certain kinds of outcomes rather than others?

One of the key differences between interpretivist and behaviorist studies is that interpretivists believe political science pays too high a price for avoiding the asking of *political* questions about political phenomena in order to generate parsimonious cause-and-effect truths, for those truths are often so spare as to deprive us of a full understanding of what is at stake in political relationships. Interpretivist studies are typically aimed at trying to understand political life in its rich and full complexity, so that the kinds of “data” sought by them involves asking questions that stimulate a broad range of perspectives on the same phenomena, as well as in-depth, often critical reflections on the meaning of political experiences from the point of view of those who directly experienced them, as well as those trying to grasp the meanings of those experiences by attentive listening. Interpretivists tend to be in accord with Tocqueville’s memorable observation that “. . . nothing is so difficult to appreciate as a fact” (Tocqueville 1945: 227). Interpretivist observations may also derive from critical rumination on the thoughts and actions of political actors who are aware of nuances, tangled relationships, ironic twists on outcomes,

and ambiguous contextual forces that have shaped their actions and the actions of others around them. While such data may be unique and immeasurable, it may also have the capacity to shed light on the meaning and import of a wide range of political events.

“Making sense” of political phenomena interpretively, then, involves discerning and making meaning of our political lives through asking questions for which the answers are typically contestable, uncertain, and difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, interpretivists believe that political life entails stakes for all human beings that cannot be escaped and that trying to make sense of what is going on in political life requires us to address the kinds of questions that *arise out of these relationships, these actions, and their consequences* for us and our fellow humans. Systematic and critical engagement with these questions should, as a result, lie at the heart of the work of those who spend their professional lives trying to understand political life.

For several generations, most political scientists who study (racial) politics in the United States have been trained to study these phenomena following the behaviorist approach. One of the central aims of this essay is to suggest what is missing from this form of political science education and practice, and to propose the indispensability of rigorous education in interpretive methods of political analysis for those who would understand more fully matters of race in American political life.

2. Describing the Subject-Matters: “Race,” “Racism,” “Racialization” in Political Life.

Since the focus of this paper is the interpretation of *racial* politics, it seems wise to articulate at the outset what I mean by “race” and its associated terminology playing a role in political life. What is a “race”? What do we mean when we look at another person and say to ourselves that she is a member of another “race”? As noted in the first sentence of this paper, most of us agree today that races are a social construction, but it is also important to note here that in the way that term is used today, races are a *relatively recent* social construction. While human beings have recognized and made meaning regarding a wide variety of differences between human groupings since at least the beginnings of recorded history, the specific attributions of *racial* difference perceived in the contemporary U.S. emerged in the sixteenth century, and in connection with the explosion of colonialism and imperialism in the period that followed Europe’s self-interpreted “age of exploration” (see, e.g., Frederickson 2002; Roberts 2015: Chapter 1).

As socially constructed in the modern period, that is, *racial* identities emerged in conjunction with the European domination of North and South America, Africa, and (later) much of Asia, where members of the dominant, European groups developed specifically racial ideas to explain and justify their domination. Those ideas that came to signify *racial difference* centered on the notion that people of the subordinate groups are *inherently and essentially less worthy* than the members of the dominant group. The *markers* for racial identities, particularly in the United States, emphasized visible characteristics such as skin color and other physical traits. This emphasis on physical appearance helped underpin the belief that races are biologically distinct, and that the greater worthiness of the dominant group is inherent in the group's *nature*.

Put schematically, groups encountered each other in a context that led to conflict (i.e., invasion of one group's territory by another), and when one group overpowered and dominated another, and then worked to establish and extend that domination into the future, part of the work of extending its domination involved an ideational justification for the subaltern group's subordination. In the modern context of European expansion and colonial domination initiated in the fifteenth century, that ideational justification fixed on the notion of *race*, in which the subordinate group was defined – and treated – as a less worthy species of human (or, in some cases, as sub-human). From the outset, then, the social construction of race involved the *naturalization* of race. And in this sense, the meaning of racial identity is constructed in a context of group dominance and subordination, and its fundamental role is to justify and naturalize the resulting hierarchy between groups. In sum, the core of the concept of race, and the resulting practice of racialization, is the combination of perceived physically marked essential difference, the use of power to dominate and/or exclude a subaltern racialized group, and a naturalizing ideology of justification for that domination and/or exclusion.

It seems unlikely that any group of people would willingly submit to being demeaned and subordinated in the manner just described. And we know of fierce opposition and resistance to such domination throughout the areas conquered by Europeans in the periods of European colonialism and imperialism. How, then, was it done? With respect to the U.S., the most influential recent narrative of how races and racial hierarchy have been socially constructed is that told by Omi and Winant in *Racial*

Formation in the United States (2015). Omi and Winant's depiction of racialization asserts that race has been a "master category" in the development of the United States, that it has "become the *template* of both difference and inequality" (p. 106) throughout the country. In their account, the USA's continually evolving "racial formation" is the result of "racial projects" that include *mythmaking ideologies* of essential difference (claiming authority, variously, in religious ideology, scientific ideology, etc.), a highly developed and institutionalized *racial despotism* that implemented both slavery and post-emancipation *racial oppression* that, in turn, generated an oppositional *race consciousness* and *racial resistance* that ultimately ushered in a "great transformation" in the 1960s that has since led to a new formation of *hegemonic racial hierarchy* amid continuing efforts toward *racial democracy* (Omi and Winant 2015: Chapter 4).

Omi and Winant conceptualize racial formation as a fundamentally *political* process that is not only aimed at gaining state power or getting desired public policies adopted by the state, but that also aims "to organize our understandings of race as everyday 'common sense'," and that this is done through linking together "signification and structure" (Omi and Winant 2015: 126). So *identities* and *structures* are both central to understanding racial politics, as is their *linkage*. The social processes creating and sustaining racial hierarchies are typically termed *racism* and/or *racialization*. What do these terms mean, and how do they link identities and structures? This is, of course, an extremely complex question, and I want here only to sketch out some answers as a preface for introducing various ways in which interpretive methods can and have been used to make sense of this phenomenon.

In mid-twentieth century, the primary understanding of racism in the general public and among scholars was that it derived from *prejudice* against those marked as racially different (the classic study was Allport 1979). This is a perspective that remains highly influential, perhaps even dominant, in the U.S. today. The central notion is that it is a widely shared human trait to fear, to distrust, and to disparage "others" who are perceived as fundamentally different from us. "Racial" prejudice is directed against those who are marked as racially different. These attitudes, in turn, lead many of us to turn away from, to reject and exclude, to discriminate against those we fear and disparage. We don't see them as part of "us," and certainly not as our equals, and therefore we may use our resources to treat them in ways that diminish their own resources and standing in our midst. If we are

powerful, moreover, the more we treat them as inferior to us and deprive them of opportunities to flourish and to advance their interests and resources, the more their behavior will appear to conform to our expectations. Racial hierarchy, then, derives from prejudice and the discriminatory behavior that accompanies it. In recent decades, both political science and jurisprudence have described this phenomenon as *racial animus*, *racial malice*, or sometimes simply *racial hatred*.

Because nearly all scholars studying racial animus agree that race is a social construct, their assumption is that racial prejudice is a learned attitude, that its presence can be traced to perspectives and dispositions learned from families of origin, from local community attitudes, from mass media, etc. And it is also presumed (hypothesized) that the presence of racial animus often animates racially discriminatory behavior. Indeed, in U.S. jurisprudence, demonstrated racial malice has become the primary criterion for determining unlawful racial discrimination (see, e.g., Haney López 2015: 42-43). Meanwhile, many behavioral studies of racial politics have focused on trying to observe and measure racial animus in American political life, in which racial animosity is studied as both a dependent and an independent variable. Political scientists have mainly focused on the latter, trying to discern and measure racial hostility in public opinion research, or through experimental research, and to measure its effects on political behavior and political outcomes, especially in electoral politics.

In later work I hope to do an in-depth critical analysis demonstrating the limitations of such behavioral research for understanding the roles of race in U.S. electoral politics. For this paper, it is sufficient to note that understanding racism as individual prejudice fits well within the behavioral framework of methodological individualism, in which the individual is the primary unit of analysis for understanding political behavior. Measurable opinions and behaviors are collected and aggregated from research on multiple individuals and deployed in cause-and-effect theoretical frameworks to establish evidence of causality regarding the causes and effects of racial political behavior.

Understanding racism as personal animosity toward those who are racially different, in any case, is focused on individual *identities*, but not on *structures* or the *linkages* between them. How do these come into focus? Deriving more from sociological than psychological analysis, *structural racism* initially was most forcefully articulated by

black power advocates who emerged into public consciousness during the later stages of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century (see, e.g., Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). First termed institutional racism, structural racism asserts that institutions and other social structures are among the most durable kinds of racializing social constructions because the intentionality (racial hatred, for example) that may have led to the initial establishment of racializing patterns of collective behavior may slip from consciousness through the repetition and the normalization that follows from coordinated repetition. Thus, people can be working together in institutional structures in ways that support and maintain racial hierarchy without being aware of the patterns themselves or their racializing effects.⁴ Structural racism, in short, involves racializing patterns of collective behavior that are often unobserved by those performing them, or even those who are penalized by them: it is “racism without racists.” As historical institutionalism in political science has suggested, institutions create “path dependent” patterns that are extraordinarily powerful and difficult to change (Pierson 2000).

This depiction of the linkage between personal racial bias and institutional racism places personal bias as the active agent that “drives” the discriminatory behavior that can ultimately be embodied in collective institutional behavior as structural racism. Some scholars, however, have looked for additional linkages between personal identity bias and structural racism, noting that the subordinating, unequal outcomes of institutional racialization may themselves generate additional forms of racial bias that are largely unrecognized as such by those who embody them. This third understanding of racialization goes by a variety of names – e.g., *unconscious* racism, *implicit* racism, *commonsense* racism – but the central idea is that living in racially stratified and segregated settings in a highly racialized society becomes *normalized* so that socially stigmatized “bad” or “subpar” behavior on the part of members of subordinated and oppressed racial groups comes to be expected by members of the dominant group, and then is used to rationalize the seemingly “natural” unequal social standing between groups, as well as the racially targeted regulatory behavior used to evaluate, to control and to punish such behavior.

⁴ For a contemporary overview of the structural racism thesis, see Harris and Lieberman 2015.

Haney Lopez has recently (2014) proposed a fourth understanding of racism that he terms *strategic* because those who practice it engage in “purposeful efforts to use racial animus as leverage to gain material wealth, political power, or heightened social standing” (p. 46). Those employing strategic racism may not have any particular racial animus of their own, but out of calculated self-interest (e.g., to win an election campaign) they are quite willing to exploit others’ racial fears and animosities in a very intentional way.⁵

The phenomena of racial formation, racism, racialization, and racial hierarchy described in this section constitute this writer’s relatively succinct summary of a set of depictions of race in American society gathered from a huge collection of writings published over the past five decades in a variety of disciplines, including political science. My aim is to now use this summary statement as a core reference point from which to illustrate a variety of interpretations and interpretive approaches to political analysis. But before turning to my examples of the insights and utility of interpretive approaches to understanding U.S. racial politics, it will be helpful to reflect on the implications of the ontological status of race as a *social construction*.

3. Social Construction as Ontology: Implications for Studies of Racial Identities.

What does it mean for our core understanding of racial politics when we say that racial identities are *social constructions* and not “natural” facts? Following Hay (2016), this essay argues that viewing political phenomena as “social constructions” is an *ontological* position from which to make claims about those realities, and that an *interpretive epistemology* yields the best results for gaining better understanding of these phenomena. In making this argument, my supposition is that a social constructivist ontology means that the presumed separation between knower and known, as is typical in behaviorist political science, cannot be sustained in the practice of seeking a fuller understanding of political life. Put differently, the central and distinctive ontological presumption of social constructivists is that, whereas philosophical realists⁶ “posit a reality independent of our

⁵ Haney Lopez’ primary example is that of “dog whistle” electoral campaigns (2014: *passim*), though he also recounts the post-Reconstruction systematic incarceration and convict leasing of black males by southern white law enforcement officers as another (2014: 38-41).

⁶ Most behaviorist political science appears to be based on realist assumptions.

knowledge or understanding,” social constructivists “identify a category of things (like money, marriage, and, indeed, the government) that (they contend) exist and draw whatever properties they have from our (collective) knowledge and understanding of them” (Hay 2016: 100). Thus, stipulating that racial identities are social constructions means that their existence as social facts rests upon what we presume to know about them through language, and the repetitive patterns of meaning-infused behavior that constitute institutions. More bluntly, races exist because we “know” they do through acts of perception cognitively mediated by learned markers (e.g., physical attributes, speech patterns) and linguistically constituted meanings and patterns of behavior that are institutionalized through collective repetition and reinforcement.

Building on the foundational work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Searle (1995), Hay emphasizes that social facts are *real* in that they cannot be wished away; and yet, at the same time, they are *radically contingent* in that they are not only socially constructed, but always “in process” of being deconstructed and reconstructed. This makes the constructivist conception of “politics and the political” associated with “indeterminacy rather than predictability,” and their conception of institutions “socially contingent and hence irredeemably political” (Hay 2016: 105). Because social formations (including institutions) are political and contingent, they are perpetually contested by political actors whose own understandings of their relationships to social facts and to other political actors are mediated ideationally, and are inherently limited and partial. Moreover, “for constructivists social and political realities are at least partially constituted by actors through the subjective and intersubjective understandings they develop to make sense of their experiences and to orient themselves toward their environment – and through the behaviors to which such understanding give rise” (Hay, 2016: 105). In turn, because political facts are both *real* and *contingent*, we experience them as *both* powerful – i.e., they have “staying power” in that we cannot wish them away – *and* subject to change through our (and others’) efforts as political actors.

If the idea of social construction ontologically embodies these meanings about the constitution, durability and contingency of political life, what are the implications for understanding the place of racial identities in U.S. political life? That is the question to which I now turn.

4. Studying Racial Identities as Social Constructions: Interpretive Pathways to Political Understanding.

A social constructivist ontology literally *means* that racial identities *are interpretations* of experienced social realities. It follows, I think, that *all studies of racial politics are interpretive in nature*. There is no escaping the reality that all efforts in political science to understand racial politics necessarily entail interpretations, those of the scholars and as well as those of their subjects. The questions that need addressing, then, are whether our interpretive work asks the most fruitful questions for political understanding, and whether our methods of answering those questions yields the best insights we can imagine. What sorts of help can self-consciously interpretive political science provide us in asking the right sorts of questions? What sorts of interpretive methods are available to help us answer those questions? In what follows, my aim is to illustrate the kinds of questions that interpretivists ask, and some of the kinds of methods they use in trying to answer those questions. Later work will delve more deeply into several of these questions, and interpretive work aiming to address them.

As a point of departure, I think it is crucial to emphasize that awareness and seeking an understanding of *context* plays a central role in making sense of social constructions of identity, including racial identity. Our identities have meaning only in relation to other identities, and those meanings are deeply shaped by the contexts within which identities are formed, shaped and performed. All identities gain meaning only in *contexts of difference*, where boundaries have been drawn between people (e.g., “you” vs. “me”; “us” vs. “them”; see Connolly, 1991, for an extended discussion). Without boundaries there are no identities. But it is our understandings of the contexts in which human encounters occur that shape and give meaning to those boundaries, and that help channel the actions of those engaged in those encounters. There are a number of ways in which interpretive analysts have worked to make sense of racial politics through contextual analysis. The examples that follow are among those I have found most illuminating.

A. Historical Narrative. The understanding of race outlined above, in section 2 of this essay, depicts the genesis of the social construction of races as a European colonial and imperial project that occurred within a particular historical context: the conquest and domination of much of the world outside Europe. How is such an understanding

developed? Historical understanding is developed through looking into the human past by examining artifacts of past lives and social formations, as well as the discursive records of those who lived those lives, seeking and interpreting clues as to what those lives and societies were like and what they meant to those who lived them as well as to those of us trying to understand them. In the specific case of racial formation in the U.S., historians have drawn upon a vast trove of records from those involved in the construction of racial identities from the sixteenth century forward to the present. The writers of historical narratives of racial formation, moreover, tell their stories of the emergence, alteration, and maintenance of racial identities by weaving the documents and other artifacts they have found, together with other information and ideas they have gathered, into an interpretive depiction of the historical contexts in which their subjects worked, and the effects of their subjects' actions on the people and communities with whom they were intertwined and with whom they interacted.⁷

These historical narratives, of course, are themselves discursive constructs that make meaning by shaping their readers' understandings of racial identities, both in the past and in the present, reinforcing or challenging their readers' previous conceptions of race, and/or introducing new perspectives on the matter. None of these narratives can be said to give the last word on the subject, since every interpretation is subject to criticism, and because new historical artifacts and new ways to understand what happened in the past continue to emerge for our consideration. Still, the larger point remains: the way we understand the social construction of racial identities is by trying to understand the social contexts, and the ideas and actions of those in the past, and in the present, who can be identified as playing a role in the construction of those identities.

None of this is to say that those human actors most involved in the social construction of racial identities knew exactly what they were doing, or the full range of relevant effects of their actions. While their ideas, their words and explicit intentions are important historical records, this does not imply that these actors were fully – or even

⁷ Among the most noteworthy: Du Bois (1935, 1998) on Black Reconstruction following the Civil War; Frederickson (2002) on the history of racism; Horsman (1981) on race and manifest destiny in the nineteenth century; and Morgan (1975) on the emergence of race-based slavery in colonial Virginia. There are many more such narratives.

mostly – cognizant of the ideational and social contexts that shaped their words and actions, or their consequences for themselves and others. And the same is true, as noted, of those constructors of historical narratives who have pieced together the contextualized stories that we rely upon to understand racialization in the past. I will return to the implications of this inevitable uncertainty below.

Historical narratives contribute to our understanding of contemporary racial politics because our own world can be understood as, in part, an extension of the past. Despite their contingency, the durability of social formations means that they embody numerous attributes and dynamics that were developed, nurtured and sustained by those who came before us. Much of who we think ourselves to be, much of what we think and do, has roots in the words and deeds of those long dead. So understanding the history of racialization and the past constructions of racial hierarchy offers indispensable insights and understanding of patterns of racial behavior and racial hierarchies in our present.

B. Institutional Analysis. As noted above in the discussion of the ontological status of race, the social construction of racial formations most often works through institutions, which involves the establishment and maintenance of the regularized cooperative patterns of behavior through which most large-scale, complex tasks are performed in contemporary political communities. Institutions do their work by melding together the activities of people through both formal rules and informal norms, and their work affects people's lives and well-being in a multitude of ways. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that institutions operate in ways that may reinforce and enhance power relationships and racial hierarchies, or they may work to deconstruct such hierarchies.

As noted in section 2, above, structural or institutional racism has been the subject of considerable analytic work, and much of that has been done by scholars whose work is self-consciously interpretive in nature. Among recent examples are several that critically examine the role of *public policies* and the *institutions* created by them in initiating and reinforcing structural racial inequalities. Some of the most prominent of these are Katznelson's path-breaking historical studies of the New Deal and its aftermath (2005, 2013), documenting how the Congressional Democratic Party's dominant coalition of northerners and southern racial segregationist conservatives dramatically expanded the role of the national state in American lives, simultaneously using that expansion to shore

up and create new benefits and opportunities for white working and middle class Americans but largely excluding African Americans from these benefits and opportunities. The title of Katznelson's 2005 study, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, accurately conveys his central thesis: such New Deal policies as Federal government backing for unionization, social security, old-age and social welfare benefits, long-term housing mortgages, post-war GI-Bill benefits, and more, were structured to exclude most African Americans from receiving their benefits in order to secure political support from the Southern racial conservatives who dominated Congress, and helped to transform and shore up the U.S. racial hierarchy. The racial reforms passed by Congress during the 1960s, Katznelson suggests, were too weak to overcome the structural advantages generated for the white population by the New Deal.

Other interpretive writers have proffered accounts of additional public policy foundations for the persistence of racial inequality in the contemporary period. Troutt (2013) emphasizes the relative *autonomy of local governments* (created and sustained by state governments) in controlling land use and development as a key institutional foundation for perpetuating the racial segregation that works to maintain racial inequality in the United States. Roithmayr (2014) also focuses on the roles of local zoning autonomy, homeowners' associations, and housing policy in the creation of "*racial cartels*" that have "locked in" white advantage in U.S. society. Anderson (2010), in turn, offers a sweeping and highly detailed analysis of institutionalized *racial segregation* as the key foundation for the persistence of racial inequality, citing a range of institutions and public policies – including local government autonomy, Federal highway and housing policies, and more – as central enablers of racial segregation.

Yet another institutional regime assessed in interpretive accounts of persistent racial inequality is that of *criminal justice system*. The most influential interpretation of this structural support for racial hierarchy is Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2011). Alexander's book has raised awareness of the racial consequences of recent crime-fighting policy, and especially the war on drugs. Interpretively, she puts these contemporary developments into a larger historical contextual frame, showing their similarities to southern state Jim Crow criminal justice policies that targeted black males for incarcerated service at the hands of white employers. Her work shows that contemporary anti-crime policies are

administered in ways that similarly target African American males, entrapping them in a carceral system that has devastating effects on large swaths of U.S. black communities. And while these anti-black “tough-on-crime” policies are often associated with conservative Republican elected officials and campaigns, a more recent interpretive book by Murakowa (2014) argues that the origins and continued existence of these policies more accurately can be traced to liberal Democratic actions taken in the early post-World War II period.

Again, these are just illustrative of a wide range of interpretive studies that analyze the role of institutions and other structures in fostering and sustaining racial hierarchy in the United States. Their methods are interpretive in that they create political understanding by showing how the “rules of the game” – both formal and informal – embodied in institutional structures shape the lives of members of different racial groups in different ways, leading to systemic racial inequalities that are highly durable. At the same time, these studies make clear that the decisions taken, and the rules followed by institutional actors are contingent, in that they could have been taken in alternative and more racially egalitarian and democratic directions.

C. Critical Discourse Analysis. As social constructions, racial identities and racializing behavior and structures rely heavily on *words* as core building materials. The use of language – discursive action – lies at the heart of both racialization and anti-racism as political phenomena. It also lies at the heart of our efforts to make sense of, to find meaning in, our political world, for interpretive analysis is a discursive activity. It should come as no surprise, then, that critical analysis of political discourse is one of the major pathways to interpretive understanding of political life, and therefore, of racial politics.

To this writer, the concept of critical discourse analysis signifies attempts to assess the suitability, the appropriateness, the veracity, the meaningfulness, the political significance of discursive constructions that have been put forward to build, to deconstruct, or to help us understand political life. In the case of analyzing racial politics, there is a vast array of such critical analytic efforts from which to choose, and future work in this project will delve more deeply into a number of them. For now, it might be helpful to illustrate with a few examples of the kinds of work being done by interpretive political scholars doing critical discourse analysis.

As noted above, *historical narratives* contribute importantly to our understanding of racial politics. At the same time, these narratives are themselves discursive constructions that are subject to critical analysis. Over the past several generations, some of the most important historical works on the subject of race have been correctives to previous understandings of U.S. political development in which people of color were missing almost entirely, and certainly as historical agents. Prior to these correctives, generations of Americans were educated in U.S. public schools with virtually no understanding of how people of color came to be part of the U.S. political community, and on what terms, or what roles they played in the development of the United States. These critiques of Eurocentric depictions of the U.S. historical narrative have helped to generate greater understanding of the diversity of cultural communities that have played a role in U.S. development, as well as ongoing struggles over racialization and racial hierarchy over time (see, e.g., Acuña 2014; Bennett 1987; Deloria 1988; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Foley 2014; Harding 1983; Lee 2015; Takaki 1989). Some of these critiques have generated significant controversy among educators and U.S. school boards, and contemporary racial politics remains deeply divided over the question of how to interpret the place of people of color and of racialization in the country's understanding of its own past and present. Political conservatives typically want to understand the history of the U.S. as one of steady and on-going *progress* toward a "color-blind" society in which Americans no longer "see" racial division, and racial hierarchy is a bad memory relegated to the past and best forgotten. Those on the political left, on the other hand, see a much more complex, enduring, and constitutive place for race in the political life of the country. A number of interpretive political scholars have critically examined these competing narratives, and have made important contributions to our understanding of the role of race in the construction of the U.S. These include those placing race in the story of the evolution of U.S. political ideas, fault-lines, and alignments (see, e.g., HoSang 2010; King and Smith 2005, 2011; Smith 1997; Young and Meiser 2008), as well as those who reframe U.S. political development as part of the story of European colonialism (see, e.g., Bruyneel 2007; Olson 2004; Roberts 2014; Scott 2004). In future work, I will do a more in-depth survey and analysis of this important interpretive scholarship.

Though they don't typically identify themselves primarily as interpretivists, *political theorists* studying U.S. racial politics have contributed a second, different form of insightful

critical discourse analyses of race in American politics. Once again, it is possible here to offer only a few illustrative examples. One of the most illuminating and influential political theorists to offer incisive critical analyses of American self-understandings regarding race was Michael Paul Rogin, who favored psychoanalytic analyses to demonstrate the often self-delusional and destructive character of dominant American ideas about the roles of race and peoples of color in the political development of the United States. Among the most important of Rogin's contributions along these lines were an in-depth analysis of Andrew Jackson's relationship to American Indians (1975); a critical interrogation of the "demons" unleashed by the U.S.'s fraught understanding of, and relationships with the land and nature, with its conquered and subjugated peoples, and by its penchant for self-delusional political narratives (1987); and in his last book, an astonishingly penetrating critical analysis of the complex and tragic relationship between Jewish immigrant assimilation in the twentieth century and U.S. racial hierarchy (1996).

One strand of American racial discourse that has received important critical analysis by political theorists in recent years is that of the political role of the black prophetic voice in regard to the devastation caused by U.S. racialization, as well as the light shone by black prophets for a way forward. Among the most notable of these theoretical contributions have been Balfour's study of James Baldwin (2000), Marshall's *The City on the Hill from Below* (2011), Shulman's *American Prophecy* (2008), and West's *Black Prophetic Fire* (2014). And, on a variety of other subjects involving the politics of race and racialization, other significant critical analyses of American political racial discourse by political theorists include Balfour's *Democracy's Reconstruction* (2011), a highly instructive critical dialogue with W.E.B. DuBois' writings on U.S. racial politics and democracy; Barvosa's *Wealth of Selves* (2008), an intensive intersectional interrogation of identity politics; Beltrán's *The Trouble with Unity* (2011), a critical analysis of Latina/o politics; Fong's *American Exceptionalism and the Remains of Race* (2014), a "multicultural exorcism"; Mills' *The Racial Contract* (1999), a critical analysis of (de)racialized social contract theory; and Rocco's *Transforming Citizenship* (2014), a wide-ranging and insightful discursive analysis of the racialization of Latinos in U.S. political life. And there are many more that could be included here, but for lack of space.

There are other forms of critical discourse analysis of racial politics that space limitations preclude discussing here. Among these are *critical race theory*, as developed primarily by legal scholars (see, e.g., Delgado and Stefancic 2013), as well as a wide range of works that critically assess the political choices made and/or recommended by race scholars and political actors engaged in the deconstruction of old and the construction of new social formations involving racial identities.

The point that needs emphasis is that the critical discursive works sketched here share one important characteristic: each of them is engaged in trying to improve our recognition and understanding of the ways that racial identities are embedded in U.S. political ideas, relationships, and institutions, as well as what is at stake in the political conflicts that involve them. And they do so by critically interrogating the discursive materials that claim to inform us of the realities of racial politics in the United States. These critical discourse analyses, in turn, help us to “make sense” of racial politics, and to think about the significance of these political phenomena as well.

D. Framing Analysis. While critical discourse analysis aims at assessing and improving discursive materials regarding political life, such explicit political discourses occur within implicit *contextual frames* that are often unrecognized by us. In this writer’s view, at any rate, framing is one of the bases for all conscious understanding, but we are not normally conscious of our frames. Frames are both cognitive and moral. We make sense of the world around us through *cognitive frames*, and we make sense of our role in the world through *moral frames*. Cognitive frames enable us to “see” the world in which we are embedded, while moral frames give us direction from which to connect with the world in a purposeful way.

Critical frame analysis asks us to step back from those frames that are employed in political discourse and understanding, in order to deconstruct, to question, to ask how our frames affect our understandings of human relationships and wellbeing in political communities. Frame analysis critically interrogates the work that frames do, investigating how they guide and direct both cognitive and moral understanding of political phenomena. The primary work that frames do is to *provide context and perspective* to discrete information about phenomena – events, beings, actions, behavior, material objects, scenes, etc. – enabling us to make sense of their meaning and significance.

Since the social and political world in which we live contains many purposive actors with multiple perspectives interacting in complex ways, there are always multiple potential ways to make meanings of these phenomena, and hence, multiple frames come into play. Once frames are deployed and especially once they are widely shared among members of political communities, it is easy to lose awareness of their contingent origins and the role they play in meaning making. Both the common multiplicity of frames and their relatively hidden quality lead to (and help to explain) political conflict.

Political frame analysis seeks to bring the frames being employed in political discourse and understanding into conscious awareness so that they can be critically interrogated. More specifically, frame analysis attempts to clarify and problematize the contextual assumptions and preconceptions deployed in political discourses by questioning their appropriateness and searching for alternative frames that seem equally, or more, compelling for understanding the political engagements in which we are inevitably enmeshed. The promise of critical frame analysis is that it will yield a fuller, richer and more self-aware understanding of the meanings we attribute to political phenomena by helping us to recognize, critique and evaluate the contextual assumptions that underlie and shape much of our political knowledge and our political actions.

In work that builds on this essay, I hope to demonstrate in detail the benefits of critical frame analysis for understanding racial politics by comparing and contrasting the political implications of several competing frames involving race in U.S. politics. One of these has already been noted above, in regards to our understanding of *the constitutive role of race in the political development of the United States*. The dominant frame in the U.S. political understanding of its own history is one in which this country was founded and settled by freedom-loving people seeking to escape religious and political tyranny. They founded a country that became a beacon of freedom to the whole world and, while early Americans held benighted and now-rejected prejudices against certain peoples of color and did some bad things as a result of these prejudices, the racial history of the country is best understood as one of gradual progress in eliminating racial prejudice and discrimination so that today all Americans enjoy equal access to the blessings of liberty. In short, this dominant frame views the founding of the country as a benefit for all humankind, and

racialization and racial hierarchy as but temporary aberrations from the unstoppable course of national progress toward equal liberty for all.

Some of the critiques of this historical narrative by scholars of race in American political development have pointed to flaws in this story of unremitting progress toward an egalitarian and “colorblind” society. Smith (1997), for example, articulates a “multiple traditions” understanding of U.S. political development, in which ascriptive racial and gender hierarchy is one of the traditions that has been present throughout much of the country’s history. King and Smith (2005, 2011), moreover, have extended this analysis, building on Omi and Winant’s notion of “racial formations” to outline two competing and long-term *racial orders* at the heart of U.S. political development, founded and defended by competing *racial political alliances* committed, on the one hand, to *white supremacy*, and on the other, to *transformative racial egalitarianism*. While these critiques are highly critical of the dominant narrative of U.S. racial political development, the point I want to make is that they share the basic frame of that dominant narrative: the U.S. was settled and developed by people seeking to build a new and unique country – and “exceptional” America – dedicated to a form of freedom and democracy that embodies universal values that would be of benefit to the entire world.

There is an alternative frame to this dominant one, however, that offers instructive insights for those trying to make sense of U.S. racial politics: a *colonialist frame* in which the U.S. experience is not understood in terms of American exceptionalism, but rather as one form of the European colonial expansionist domination of much of the non-European world. One example of this genre is Olson’s *The Abolition of White Democracy* (2004). Inspired especially by the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Olson’s central historical claim is that U.S. democracy was founded as a *Herrenvolk* settler-state and that this state’s democratization in the early nineteenth century was exclusively limited to the white male population. But the frame from which he works is that of European colonialism and imperialist thought. Similarly, Young and Meiser (2008) have criticized King and Smith’s depiction of race in U.S. political development as inadequate for the pre-Civil War period, in which, they assert, the notion of a racially egalitarian political alliance was virtually absent from U.S. political development. In its place they posit a social *contract state* for white Americans, but a racially *predatory state* for U.S. peoples of color. Bruyneel (2007) also uses

a post-colonialist frame to incisively discuss the meaning of American Indian claims to sovereignty, and that frame enables us to understand, among other things, why American Indians have fought for so long with such persistence to maintain their separate identities and political communities. My point here is that in employing critical frame analysis it is possible to bring implicit understandings that shape and channel racial politics into conscious awareness so that they can be subjected to critical analysis and give us new understandings of the meanings of our racial politics.

E. Political Ethnography. The final interpretive pathway to political understanding that I want to outline here is that of political ethnography. First developed by anthropologists, ethnographic research involves varying degrees of immersing oneself in the world of one's research subjects in order to understand that world from their perspectives. In political science, this means that the ethnographic researcher tries to understand the political situation, beliefs, and actions of political actors from the actors' point of view by observing and talking extensively with them about their lived political lives (see, e.g., Schatz 2009). There are several approaches to political ethnography, ranging from intensive and relatively long-term fieldwork to participant-observation to ethnographic interviewing (see, e.g., Rhodes 2016). Long-term fieldwork is more characteristic of comparative politics scholars in political science than of American politics scholars, and in the study of U.S. racial politics it is more typical to find examples of what Rhodes describes as "hit-and-run" ethnography (Rhodes 2016: 181). This would include the kinds of studies in which the researcher does not spend months or even years far from home and significantly different from that in which the researcher lives, but rather engages in participant-observation research and/or conducts ethnographic interviews while still carrying on other activities such as living at home with her family, teaching university courses, etc.

The benefit of ethnographic research such as this is that it enables us to understand the political world – and the meanings and significance of race in politics – from the multiple perspectives of our fellow political actors. In-depth interviews, for example, bring the possibility of much deeper and more nuanced understandings of the meaning of the subjects' racial identities and ethnic connections than is possible through research tools such as survey research. And combining such ethnographic interviews with critical framing

analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis offers the possibility of gaining even greater understanding of the meaning and significance of the racialized political formations in which Americans live. One example of the richness of this form of analysis can be found in Hayward's *How Americans Make Race* (2013). By combining the "life story" narratives of her research subjects with her own historically grounded institutional and geographic analysis of racialization, Hayward presents a powerful frame analysis demonstrating that the geographically specific institutionalized spaces within which members of white and black racial groups live, spaces that objectified early twentieth century "stories" of racial difference, now shape individual understandings in which both white and black people fail to recognize the way these institutionalized spaces privilege the white population and severely disadvantage those confined to "black" neighborhoods. In future work in this project, I will aim to demonstrate the value of political ethnographic research in understanding the construction of racial hierarchy in the U.S., showing how this approach to political understanding can compensate for weaknesses inherent in survey research and other forms of behavioralist political analysis.

5. Conclusions.

As noted at the outset, this paper is an effort to begin a systematic investigation of the need for, and the advantages of, using self-consciously interpretive methods of political analysis to study racial politics in the United States. Without disparaging the efforts of those who use behavioralist methods of political research, my aim has been to demonstrate that because of its constructivist ontological foundation, all social scientific studies of racial politics are necessarily interpretivist in nature, that there are a host of important political questions about racial politics that need investigation by political scientists that cannot be asked or answered within the confines of behavioralist paradigms of research and analysis.

In the work that builds on this essay, I hope to demonstrate convincingly the necessity for, and the benefits of, using self-consciously interpretivist approaches to make sense of racial politics in the United States, to help uncover illuminating meanings of the place of racial identities in U.S. politics and power relationships, and for understanding what is at stake in this country's politics of race. In particular, I will compare several behavioralist attempts to understand and explain the role of race in U.S. electoral politics with several self-consciously interpretive works on the same subject, in order to

demonstrate the benefits of, and the necessity for the latter. As well, I will critically explore competing frames for understanding the place of racial identities in the construction of the U.S. political order, and the ongoing importance of critically engaging historical narratives in order to understand the politics of race in our own time. And I will seek to demonstrate the utility of interpretive approaches for understanding contemporary issues in racial politics such as the question of whether the U.S. is better understood as a bi-racial or a multi-racial political community, again contrasting these approaches to political knowledge with behavioralist approaches. Finally, I will draw upon contemporary interpretivist work to explore the question of what is entailed in aiming to transform the United States political order into a racial democracy.

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