



December 1995

The Scar of Race. Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza. Reviewed by Barbara W. White, University of Texas at Austin.

Barbara W. White
University of Texas, Austin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

White, Barbara W. (1995) "*The Scar of Race.* Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza. Reviewed by Barbara W. White, University of Texas at Austin.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 4 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol22/iss4/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



comprehensive attempt to extend social welfare to excluded minorities. But, as on previous occasions, racial problems limited its effectiveness. While the component programs of the War on Poverty showed considerable promise, they failed to reach their objectives because they were subsumed under more dominant racial struggles. For example, the job training program was deadlocked when the unions refused to permit the entry of black apprentices into well-paying construction jobs. The introduction by the Federal government of affirmative action hiring sought to correct this problem but instead fostered hostility by blue collar workers towards the Democratic Party and undermined the purpose of the program. Similarly, the community action program failed to improve local service provision and instead became a mechanism for political control and patronage. With the election of Richard Nixon, the role of race in social policy was recognized and exploited through the introduction of social policies that produced electoral advantage for the Republican administration.

This important book makes a major contribution to the analysis of social policy in the United States. It is solidly grounded in historical research, well written and plausible. Its signal contribution is to explicate the significance of the racial factor in social policy analysis. With the increasing diversification of the populations of the European nations, its argument will have wider relevance.

James Midgley
Louisiana State University

Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza, *The Scar of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. \$19.95 hardcover.

It has been predicted that the decade of the 1990s will best be known as the years of the "cultural imperative" in the United States. It is certainly clear that the whole issue of race and ethnicity continues to have saliency for most of our American institutions. With the emphasis on domestic policies as expressed through the recent national election, this study appears at a critical time in contributing to an understanding of race and racial politics in

these “cultural imperative” years. The authors of this book call into question many prevailing views and beliefs about the nature of racism in the United States. There is reasonable certainty that their hypotheses are capable of provoking spirited debate in these times of political correctness.

The generally accepted belief that racism is an invariable phenomenon is this nation is exposed to extensive analysis by the authors. While a great deal of the current literature on diversity focuses on a singular manifestation of racism and racist attitudes, the authors posit that the shape of racial politics has taken on a new character—one that is far more complex, more divisive, and morally more problematic. Using the results of five public opinion surveys, three national and two regional, this study asserts that it is wrong to suppose that the primary factor driving contemporary arguments over the politics of race is white racism. Instead, it is hypothesized that there is no longer *one* issue of race but a number of distinct issues. Further, the contemporary politics of race has as much to do with politics as with race. The continued existence of racial prejudice is acknowledged in the findings, but relegated to a subordinate position in its power to dominate the political thinking of ordinary Americans. A central finding that will provoke a great deal of interest is the assertion that most white Americans’ views on race are pliable and subject to change. The use of computer technology in conducting interviews is purported to have allowed a more complex analysis of public opinions by capturing the variability that has not been possible when using more traditional methods of data gathering.

Sniderman and Piazza use a number of exemplars from the survey responses to explain how racial politics vary based upon the type of issue being examined. For example, the consistency of responses related to government spending, fair housing, set-asides, and affirmative action are analyzed, and results presented that document the existence of policy preferences based on whether issues are related to social welfare, equal treatment, or read-conscious policy agendas. Opinions are seen as more consistent when the issues are connected within a specific agenda category. These multiple agendas are interpreted as directing the politics of race. To assume that the movement to advance the struggles of Blacks has progressed from an emphasis on equal

treatment to a race-conscious agenda is a serious misread of the new racial politics, according to the authors.

The authors refute the generally held belief that the major change in racist attitudes is movement from overt to more subtle expressions of racism. Responses to survey questions portraying negative characterizations of African Americans, according to this analysis, demonstrate that such characterizations continue to exist, yet are widely diffused and far from uncommon even among respondents who identify themselves as liberals. The authors describe how such negative perceptions of Blacks emanate not from individualistic values but values of authoritarianism, and Blacks are perceived by whites to violate these values more frequently.

Analyzing the results of a "Laid-off worker" experiment, and "Equal Opportunity" experiment, and a "Mere mention experiment," the authors assert that charges of covert racism and prejudice in all parts of American Society are unequivocally wrong and destructive. The negative effect of assuming ubiquitous and pervasive covert racism is that attention is deflected from the social welfare and equal treatment agendas and directed toward the more controversial race-conscious agenda. It is this agenda among the three that has the most disfavor among white Americans. It is interesting that political ideology, that is, liberalism or conservatism, was not found to be a significant factor in explaining whether respondent practiced a double standard in their preferences for and opposition to policies intended to help blacks. Findings also seem to support the long held belief that education is a strong variable in the expression of racism.

This work brings a worthwhile addition to discussions focused on the "gut" issue of race in the United States. While the conclusions drawn by the authors warrant further investigation, they nonetheless appear to have considerable merit in helping to foster some rethinking of assumptions that both Blacks and non-Blacks have long held about the facts of racism. This book is not an easy read. The introduction, six chapters, and conclusion provide a great deal of explanation and interpretation of the authors' theses. There is also not an even flow of the content since the authors discuss quite extensively beforehand what the reader will read and then postscript what the reader has read. Nonetheless,

I found this book intriguing. Policy scientists believe that public opinion is very unstable and surveys can register signs of change without any real changes in opinion. This treatise on the “scar of race” may provide the impetus to begin to question *this* belief.

Barbara W. White
The University of Texas at Austin