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Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza: Black Pride and Black Prejudice

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1 Introduction

Sometimes separated by many years, sometimes by only a few, a succession of clashes—between blacks and Jews, blacks and Asians, blacks and Latinos, blacks and whites—have captured the headlines. There was, for instance, the Tawana Brawley case. It began with a false charge of sexual abuse by a young black woman against a group of police officers, then generated a series of ever more bizarre charges—against a Dutchess County, New York, assistant district attorney, and ultimately against the state attorney general and the governor of New York—with every allegation, however improbable, affirmed by prominent blacks.¹ There were the demonstrations against Freddy’s Fashion Market, a Jewish-owned business in Harlem, protesting the failure to renew the lease of a black-owned business.² The demonstrators marched to the rhythm of anti-Semitic slogans and the demonstrations ended with the burning of the store and the murder of eight inside it.³ There was the destruction of Korean-owned businesses in the Los Angeles riots. Their destruction—and the even more massive devastation of Latino-owned businesses—was variously explained or justified as a response to earlier mistreatment of black customers by Korean merchants.⁴ And before all of these, there was the searing struggle in

¹ See McFadden, Blumenthal, Farber, Shipp, Strum, and Wolff 1990. The original charge was made in November, 1987.

² The decision not to renew the lease of the local black business was made by the building owner, a black church.

³ The killings and fire took place on December 8, 1995. The event was covered extensively in the *New York Times* and other newspapers.

⁴ For an uncommonly nuanced and revealing account that throws new light on the issue of intergroup conflict in potentially incendiary circumstances, see Lee 2002. The Los Angeles riots took place in April, 1992.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn pitting black activists and a black governing board against a teachers union led by a Jew and made up disproportionately of Jews. Even after these many years, Ocean Hill-Brownsville sticks in the minds of many Jews and blacks as a symbol of the limits of the moral commitment of each to the other.⁵

All these incidents, and many others as well, seem to teach a common lesson. There is first an explosive confrontation between blacks and some other group, then a barrage of appeals for racial solidarity by black activists to the larger black community, coupled with slurs against the other group caught up in the confrontation, accompanied on occasion by the threat of violence and, sometimes, violence itself. The lesson, it seems, is that appeals for black solidarity fuel black intolerance and that black intolerance fuels appeals for black solidarity.

Are black pride and black intolerance opposite sides of the same coin? This question is at the center of this book.

I

We answer this question in the only way it can be answered—by asking black Americans to share with us their thinking. From February to August in 1997, we talked to a representative sample of black Americans in Chicago—756 in all.⁶ We asked them a great range of questions, from evaluations of prominent black leaders such as Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, through their views about core American values, to their views about a whole variety of other groups in contemporary American society, among them Jews, Asians, Latinos, and whites. We naturally inquired as to their views about controversial issues like affirmative action, with results that may surprise many. But we spent still more time exploring their ideas about their sense of solidarity with other blacks and their beliefs about the importance of blacks achieving more control over their lives, greater recognition of black accom-

⁵ See especially Ravitch 1974; see also Cannato 2001. The strike occurred in 1968.

⁶ The Survey Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley, conducted the interviews over the telephone. A technical description of the method of drawing the sample and of its properties is set out in appendix A.

plishments, and a stronger sense of black pride and self-respect. And, though this may seem to turn things upside down, we asked to what extent are the values of black Americans the values of Americans as a whole?

It is of course natural to ask to what extent our findings may be generalized. Chicago, as both its partisans and critics will tell you, is unique in some respects, and black Chicagoans obviously may differ in some respects from black Americans who live in other cities, or who do not live in cities at all, or who live in quite different parts of the country. It is right to be concerned about whether blacks from Chicago are typical insofar as we picked Chicago precisely because it is atypical. It is the headquarters of Louis Farrakhan and the Black Muslims, and one of the aims of our study is to explore the impact of both on the thinking of black Americans. It surely is possible that blacks who live where Black Muslims are exceptionally prominent may be more committed to black pride and solidarity—or committed to a different conception of those ideals—than blacks who live elsewhere.

The problem of generalizability was a fundamental consideration in the design of our study. So we built in checkpoints, systematically incorporating questions from other studies of black Americans. This is particularly true for the measures at the center of our study, those of racial identification. The result is that we can compare our results with those of national surveys of black Americans, and see to what extent they are similar or not. But replication is only part of our effort. We also draw on a large-scale national survey of Americans that allows us directly to compare the views of black and white Americans.

But of course it is natural to ask a deeper question. How much trust can be put in public opinion surveys, quite apart from whether the respondents are black, white, or some other subset of Americans?

The objections to public opinion surveys are well rubbed, and they increasingly have been reinforced by the skepticism or cynicism (depending on your point of view) that has become so prominent a feature of American intellectual culture. For our part, let us put our cards on the table. First, there are limits to what can be learned from surveys. Second, given the crudity of measurement and the inherent abstractness of statistical analysis, the use of numbers can easily give a false sense of precision. Granting both

points, the hand of the cynic is less strong than it seems. All forms of judgment, qualitative as well as quantitative, are imperfect. The whole point of the apparatus of quantitative studies—of representative sampling and systematic measurement—is not that it allows one to avoid error, but rather that it permits one to get an estimate of how much error there is.⁷ More broadly, criticisms of the weaknesses of public opinion surveys remind us of Winston Churchill's sally in response to a question about the weaknesses of democracy. It is the worst form of government, he declared, except for all the others. So, too with public opinion surveys. Trying to infer what citizens think from the views of political activists or intellectuals, from the popularity of television shows or the sales of books or any other similarly indirect indicator of public opinion, is still worse. If you want to know what citizens think, it is necessary to ask them.

One can do this in the manner of a Studs Terkel, putting to each person the questions that seem most apt for him or her, following the twists and turns each conversation naturally and distinctively takes. Qualitative interviews can contribute much. But if you want to know what members of a large group—what citizens of a city or a state or a country characteristically think about some matter—it is necessary to carry out a public opinion survey. For all its limitations, and they are not trivial, the public opinion survey has the invaluable strength of representativeness. If you have picked the people you wish to interview in the proper way, it is possible to learn what is typically the case. And unless you know the way that things typically are, you have no way of telling whether any particular person you see or talk to represents the exception or the rule. What we want to map out is the landscape of opinion. That means identifying the points of view in the black community that command large amounts of support. Still more important, it means finding out how the views of black Americans about one subject most commonly fit together with their views about others, to form a larger, coherent outlook on life. There is no better way—indeed, no *other* way—to find this out than to carry out a properly representative survey of public opinion.

⁷ So in reporting our results we will, when feasible, present both the absolute values that we observed and the confidence limits (or sampling errors) that should be placed around them.

II

This book is about a trio of questions. First, to what extent, and in what ways, do blacks in America take pride in being black? Second, what underlies an avowal of a racial identity—a sense of estrangement with America, a desire to be better-off personally, a need to compensate for feeling a lack of personal self-worth, or a lack of intellectual sophistication—or perhaps just the other way around, the very fact of being intellectually aware and engaged by the arguments of the day? Third, with what other ideas, beliefs about the world, assumptions about the nature of other people, is a sense of black identity and pride bound up—and, above all, to what extent is a feeling of racial identity and pride inclusive or, alternatively, chauvinistic in spirit?

Some of the answers to these questions are straightforward, or as nearly so as one might expect given the natural complexity of people's motivations. Others are more difficult, and what we have to contribute is correspondingly limited and tentative. The paramount question in gauging the meaning of black pride, however, can be put simply: If valuing being black means devaluing those who are not black, then black pride means one thing; if it does not, it means quite another.

One way we have tried to answer this question is to explore the relation between racial identification and anti-Semitism. How much anti-Semitism there is among black Americans—whether the level is higher, lower, or approximately the same as that among white Americans—is not our primary concern, though we appreciate that it is a question of wide interest. What is of consequence is whether there is a connection between being prejudiced and various ways in which blacks take pride in being black. If our findings are to be persuasive, they must be traced out in detail. What we can say here is that our results indicate that, with one important qualification, there is no connection between racial identification and black anti-Semitism.⁸

⁸ As we shall show, other currents of contemporary black thought in addition to racial identification per se—among them, support for conspiratorial thinking and for Louis Farrakhan and the Black Muslims—do reinforce the susceptibility of black Americans to anti-Semitism.

The analysis of covariation—measuring what goes with what—is the standard approach in analyzing opinion surveys. But however esoteric the estimation technique, the limits of the standard approach are well known. In the stock adage, correlation is not causation. So we designed our study to exploit the strongest possible method—the randomized experiment.

We have carried out a whole battery of experiments specially designed to assess whether black loyalty and black intolerance really do go together. A specific illustration, however, may be worth mentioning. To see how racial identification may come into play in a conflict between blacks and Jews, we conducted the “College Editor” experiment. The design of the experiment is straightforward. One half of our respondents are asked whether a Jewish college editor who has published an article critical of black students should be fired. The other half are asked whether a black college editor who has published an article critical of Jewish students should be fired. Here, then, we have created a situation in which a conflict between Jews and blacks is presented in a mirror image form. In one case, it is a Jew who has done what blacks may take exception to; in the other, it is a black who has done exactly the same thing to Jews. Three points deserve emphasis. First, those who are asked about whether the Jewish editor should be fired cannot possibly figure out that the other half of the sample is being asked exactly the same question in reverse; and vice versa. Second, since the two halves are (chance differences aside) alike in every respect on account of experimental randomization, any difference in the way that our black respondents react *must* be because in one case the editor was Jewish and in the other a fellow black. Third, the College Editor experiment offers not one way but five to assess whether black pride feeds black intolerance: Are blacks more likely to favor firing a Jewish editor who criticized black students than a black editor who criticized Jewish students? Are blacks more likely to favor firing a Jewish editor the more strongly they identify themselves as blacks? Are they more likely to rally around a black editor and oppose firing him the more strongly they identify themselves as blacks? Are they more likely to favor firing a Jewish editor the more inclined they are to intolerance? And, not least interesting, are they more likely to rally around a black editor the more inclined they are to dislike Jews—in other words, does black prejudice reinforce black solidarity?

The answers to these questions illuminate in a way not possible previously the extent to which black pride encourages black intolerance. We shall state as unequivocally as possible what can be demonstrated for the first time thanks to the power of experimental randomization. First, taking pride in being black, when it makes a difference, leads blacks to be more likely to rally around a fellow black, but it does *not* lead them to be more likely to react against Jews. Second, being intolerant leads blacks to be more likely to reject Jews, but it does *not* in general lead them to be more likely to rally around a fellow black.

The relations between blacks and Jews, as symbolically and emotionally freighted as they are, are only one corner of our concern. We have carried out a battery of experiments centered on the relations between black Americans and a whole variety of other groups, including Asians, Latinos, whites, and even immigrants from Africa. Summarizing across these experiments, we will suggest that they point to two mirror-image conclusions. The first is this: On the one side, black pride encourages blacks to be more responsive to the needs and interests of fellow blacks, *but* on the other, it does not lead them to be more intolerant or punitive or hostile toward other groups in American society. Second, and conversely, black prejudice is not only largely independent of black pride, but it has just the opposite set of consequences. On the one side, black prejudice encourages blacks to reject others who are not black, while, on the other, it does *not* encourage them to identify with and rally around their fellow blacks. Quite the contrary: in certain circumstances, it can lead them to react negatively to fellow blacks.

III

One theme of this book is the sense of distinctiveness that black Americans feel by virtue of being black in America and the pride they take in a distinct black culture and identity. The other is the common ground, framework, and culture that black Americans, by virtue of being Americans, share with their fellow Americans.

What does a commitment to a common culture entail? It certainly does not require that black Americans agree with whites about whether race remains a serious problem in America, why black

Americans continue to find obstacles blocking their way forward, or what the government should do about it. For perfectly obvious and sensible reasons, black Americans tend to take a different view about issues of race than white Americans do. A commitment to the common culture, however, means at least two quite specific and definite things. The first is the repudiation of separatism. And our results on this score are clear-cut. For black Americans who make up the heart of the black community, separation as an end or as a means is overwhelmingly rejected. Indeed, our findings testify to the weight of opinion among black Americans in favor of belonging to the larger American society on the same terms as their fellow Americans: to live and work alongside them, to strengthen the common culture that binds them together, to cooperate and join together to achieve a better society.

The second thing that a commitment to a common culture means is hewing to a shared set of values. We acknowledge the difficulty of truly gauging people's view of what should guide their lives, of the ideals to which they believe they should strive to conform, of the standards of conduct to which they conclude they should and must adhere. This is a tricky business for all the obvious reasons, plus two more. The first additional difficulty is that most of the values that command support—freedom, the search for knowledge, order, the claims of religion (in some version or other)—are of value to most people. It follows that it is necessary to learn not whether black (or white) Americans believe any or all of these are important—they do—but something more complex: the balance they believe ought to be struck between these values when one of them comes into conflict with another. We attempt to gauge this balancing of conflicting values. Our approach is inevitably approximate, but we believe that our findings on the similarity of values between black and white Americans are the more convincing just so far as they show that black and white Americans do not simply value the same ideals, but strike approximately the same balance among them when these values come into conflict with one another.

The second difficulty in assessing values is that when people say that they attach great importance to a particular value, how can we tell that the value means the same thing to everyone? Take the value of educational achievement. Suppose we were to ask repre-

sentative samples of black and white Americans whether they think it is an important value. If they say that educational achievement is an important value to them, there are the questions of how they define such achievement, of the larger context in which they put it, and therefore of the particular perspective from which they view it. Black and white Americans may both be committed to achievement. Yet each may bring quite different background assumptions as to what, given the fact of racial inequality in America, should be taken as measures of it. Because we take seriously the possibility that black and white Americans are committed to a common framework of values, even to values like achievement that inescapably are caught up in differences of opinion over the continuing place of race in American life, we have worked to devise a challenging test of whether there is a common commitment or not. We are thinking particularly of the SAT experiment, which is described in chapter 4. If you do not believe that black Americans are committed—win, lose, or draw—to the larger American ideal of individual accomplishment after seeing the results of this experiment, nothing we have done will persuade you.

In taking as one of our two principal themes the common ground between black and white Americans, we do not at all mean to gain-say the anger and frustration and bitterness that many blacks feel about the persistence of racial inequality in America. That anger toward, and conviction of, persisting injustice is one of the defining features of contemporary black thought. Although it wells up in a variety of ways, we shall pay particular attention to one—a susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking. The sense of the distance that remains before equality becomes a reality, and the frustration and anger it inspires, is real and important. But it is a profound error, we have become persuaded, to allow this to obscure an even deeper rootedness of black Americans as Americans.

Our two major themes—of distinctiveness and of inclusion—may sound as though they are pulling in opposite directions. One underlines the sense of difference blacks feel from other Americans, especially white Americans; the other underscores their commonality with their fellow Americans, very much including white Americans. In some circumstances and for some people there is a strain between the two themes. But we believe that an emphasis on the

potential for tension has obscured the bedrock character of black Americans' sense of themselves as Americans. For our findings show that, with only a minority of exceptions, black Americans can and do simultaneously affirm their distinctiveness as blacks and their commitment to the common culture they share with their fellow Americans.