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Comparative Studies: Cultures, Languages, and Literatures

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One of the underlying premises of positivist social science research is that researchers can develop theories and methods which can be employed to explain and predict social phenomena in ways that are generalizable beyond anecdotal cases. Michael Tesler’s *Post-Racial or Most Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Age* is a powerful and accessible example of such social science scholarship.

Tesler’s central claim is that the election and reelection of Barack Obama as the President of the United States helped to usher in a new era of *racialization*, the process of leveraging racial attitudes on political processes (30), that was not a feature of political ideology and practice in the United States prior to 2008. Tesler’s hypothesis of *racial spillover*, whereby the existence of President Obama at the center of American political life led to changes in voter preferences and behavior across a range of policy sectors and subsequent election cycles (32) is explored through a largely quantitative approach though the polyangulation of analysis of reliable and valid social surveys in order to, “see how the effects of racial attitudes on public opinion changes over a long period of time, to determine how racial attitudes cause the exact same individuals’ political preference to change from before to after Barack Obama became president, and to establish whether Obama’s race was actually responsible for the enhanced over-time effects of racial attitudes on mass politics.” (40). This combination of, “repeated cross-sectional data with panel re-interviews and survey experiments” (43) allows Tesler to move beyond anecdotal and narrow case examples of racism in American voting behavior towards generating a larger theory about the racialization of American politics. Tesler demonstrates –regularly with statistically significant results –that the election of the first black President of the United States corresponded, if not outright contributed, to the American electorate’s racial polarization surrounding the president himself, public figures associated with Obama, public policy preferences, voting in Congressional elections, political party identification, as well as contributing to the political divide
between white and nonwhite Americans. Equally, Tesler’s discussion explicitly to alludes many of the features of the 2016 election, anticipating much of the racialized dynamism of polling, public discourse, and other features of this year’s general election cycle. While no single text can offer a comprehensive social theory of American politics, and indeed Tesler qualifies the limits of his theory along with caveats regarding his approach, the balance of the evidence presented in *Post-Racial or Most Racial?* should be rightfully seen as a cornerstone text on post-racialism in the United States within Critical Race Theory.

Based on the clarity and veracity of Tesler’s evidence and argumentation, the reader’s interest could easily be drawn to speculate about the ways in which the arguments presented in *Post-Racial or Most Racial?* could be applied outside of the confines of the original study. It is here, in fact, that Tesler’s thinking proves most useful for those interested in understanding American politics through racial lenses. The case of Hillary Clinton’s campaign for the presidency in 2016 provides an excellent testing ground for assessing the external validity of Tesler’s racial spillover hypothesis. Tesler’s analysis finds that racial resentment, whereby racially conservative white Democrats pooled their support towards Clinton during the 2008 primary and racially liberal whites as well as non-white Democrats supported Obama (86) was a significant factor in explaining intra-partisan divides during the contested nature of that year’s Democratic primary. However, racially conservative white Democrats relinquished their favorable support for Clinton in the subsequent years, particularly after Clinton was appointed as Secretary of State in Obama’s first term, leading Tesler to conclude that, “the effects of racial attitudes and race on mass assessments of Hillary Clinton from 2008 to 2012 depend on in large part on her relationship with Barack Obama” (88). While Clinton, by all accounts, had a successful career in her post as Secretary of State and later in her work for the Clinton Foundation, the
very fact that her work was tied to the Obama Administration not only turned racially conservative
white voters away from her, but also served as fodder for the Republican opposition to use towards
mobilizing racially conservative or outright white nationalist voters in subsequent years.

This pattern of racial resentment can be seen on several fronts in the 2016 presidential
campaign. First, the Republican party, candidates, and the Trump campaign regularly tie Clinton’s
positions, policies, and preferences to those of President Obama. Whether it's Wisconsin Governor
Scott Walker’s tweet of a picture of Obama and Clinton hugging on stage with the caption, “if you like
the past 8 years, vote @HillaryClinton,”¹ or Trump’s linkage of Clinton to increases in Obamacare
premiums,² there is a clear and consistent framing effort on the part of the Republican Party to link
Hillary Clinton with the U.S.’s outgoing black President. Second, Clinton continues to lag behind
Trump in white voter’s preferences, with at least double-digit polling differences in the last few
months.³ Third, as both Tesler’s analysis affirms and recent polling analysis supports,⁴ that voters who
align or identify with the Democratic Party are more racially diverse than their counterparts in the
Republican Party. Consequently, it is no surprise that the heated rhetoric directed towards Clinton and
her down-ballot Democrats is part of a larger strategy of Republicans to win elections by increasing
voter turnout and participation amongst racially conservative whites can be a seen as a manifestation of
Tesler’s racial spillover thesis. From coded, dog-whistle rhetoric from the Trump campaign delivered

¹ Walker, Scott. “If You Like the Past 8 Years, Vote @HillaryClinton.” Twitter, Twitter, 1 Nov. 2016,
² CBS News. Trump Tries to Connect Clinton to Obamacare Premium Hikes. 26 Oct. 2016,
³ Alcantara, Chris, et al. “See How Trump and Clinton’s Support Has Changed Since June Along Lines of Race,
Religion.” Washington Post, 16 Oct. 2016,
Research Center for the People and the Press, 13 Sept. 2016,
in order to shore up disaffected whites to overtly racist public and social media discourse directed
towards Clinton supporters, as well as their rejoinder in describing Republicans as the party of white
nationalists, Tesler’s key point that Democrats and Republicans had, “separate realities about race in
the Age of Obama.” (195) continues to play out in many aspects and sites in this election cycle.
Tesler’s thesis serves as an important frame through which we should continue to appreciate ways in
which Americans behave in political environments, as well a harbinger for how political elites can and
will use race in the pursuit of political power.

Discussion of a post-racial United States is one of the mainstays of Critical Race Theory.
Moving beyond biological and social constructivist arguments about the origins and meaning of race,
speculation of a post-racial America sees a sociopolitical environment free of concerns about racial
preference, discrimination, and prejudice. Indeed, the liberal notion of colorblindness, replete with its
favoritism for meritocracy and hushed, if not silenced, conversations about race, became a dominant
theme in American discourse as a way for those on the left and the right to try and transcend the racist
history and politics that is part and parcel of the American experience. As Chief Justice Roberts wrote
in his opinion in Parents Involved (2007), “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to
stop discriminating on the basis of race,” reaffirming the Court’s long-standing practice of reinforcing
racism by simply ignoring that it exists.\(^{5}\) Outside of the pinnacle of the American legal power structure,
the late journalist Daniel Schorr hopefully opined that an era of blurred racial/color lines was upon us
with the election of Barack Obama.\(^{6}\)

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Tesler presents a powerful argument against this fantasy of a post-racial America. Through the employment of solid data analysis with compelling descriptions, *Post-Racial or Most Racial?* explicates a muscular argument to reinforce claims made against a post-racial America reality that can be found in contemporary journalistic narratives. Tesler’s writing is enhanced by his use of graphics and simple-to-understand explanations of complex mathematical processes make his work accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with social science research, without betraying the methodological rigor or argumentative style of the discipline. Indeed, readers interested in finding a quantitatively-oriented companion to David Theo Goldberg’s qualititative and appealing *Are We All Postracial Yet?* would be well served in reading *Post-Racial or Most Racial?* in tandem. Perhaps most importantly, Tesler’s *Post-Racial or Most Racial?* should serve as a launching point for serious inquiry and conversations about what it means to be black, Latinx, Asian, or white and to participate in American democracy.

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8 Goldberg, David. *Are We All Postracial Yet?* Cambridge, United Kingdom, Polity, 2015.