

The black and white political paradigms

Howard C. Smith, II^a and Frank Fuller^b

a University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Pine Bluff, AR 71601 USA.

b Villanova University, Department of Political Science, Villanova, PA 19085 USA.

ABSTRACT: Instead of observing from a black perspective, we think in terms of the dominant paradigm and blame blacks and the Third World for lagging behind the USA, for they are the problem for not “doing like we do.” Why do Third World countries have such difficulties? The article “The Responsibility of the Black Political Scientist to the Black Community” suggests a black-white adversarial relationship, particularly in the USA, with black interests unfairly represented and the white, Western European, capitalistic point of view dominant. Dr. Mack Jones perceives the black paradigm's development is largely ignored by current political science approaches. Jones states: “...few areas of politics today...reflect the plight of blacks, especially in the United States, and we must change our approaches to political science” Some Western European theories relate little to black problems because whites are in power, stereotypically approaching African-American problems, surfacing the dilemma of applying a Euro-Centric viewpoint to black problems. A black perspective can show gaping holes in these theories, pointing out negative aspects of the prevailing white paradigm. The core argument is that there is no black paradigm that is perceived as being equally comparable to the white paradigm. The black paradigm can serve as a useful tool in that it can point out the many faults of the capitalist, European-American system. Furthermore, a black paradigm serves an important function in getting to the heart of black issues, seeking to empower blacks in their struggles for equal status. When one thinks of how the black paradigm is perceived as being subordinate to the white one, we are puzzled to understand that such a paradigm is even different from the current American foundations in political science. Who says that there is a dominant paradigm that reflects mostly white, Western European ways of thinking? The current paradigm may explain and solve the mystery of an emergent black paradigm in the USA. To me, there is no perfect theory or paradigm. Perhaps even the black paradigm can be applied to issues facing Asian or Hispanic communities, or even those of whites in certain aspects. How do we resolve this black paradigm issue? Across the board, adding black scholarly material strengthens alternative viewpoints. We think this assists us, as students with diverse backgrounds, to understand issues surrounding the black community, not only in the USA, but Africa as well.

Keywords: black paradigms; African-American studies; political science; American politics

INTRODUCTION

Instead of trying to observe from a black perspective, we think in terms of the dominant paradigm and blame blacks and the Third World for lagging behind us, for they are the problem for not “doing like we do.” Why do Third World countries have such difficulties? The article “The Responsibility of the Black Political Scientist to the Black Community” suggests a black versus white adversarial relationship, particularly in the United States, with black interests unfairly represented and the white,

Western European-esque, capitalistic point of view remaining dominant. Dr. Mack Jones goes on to outline this idea that the development of a black paradigm is largely ignored by the current approach to political science. Dr. Jones states that, in general: “There are few areas of politics today that reflect the plight of blacks, especially in the United States, and we must change our approaches to political science” (1992, 37). Some Western European theories do not directly relate to the problems that blacks face because whites are the ones in power and may sometimes have a stereotypical approach in studying African-American problems. This again brings up the dilemma of applying a certain Euro-Centric viewpoint to black problems. A black perspective, of course, can show gaping holes in these theories and point out the negative aspects of the prevailing white paradigm.

What ultimately, then, is the core argument is that there is no black paradigm that is perceived as being equally comparable to the white paradigm. The black paradigm can serve as a useful tool in that it can point out the many faults of the capitalist, European-American system. Furthermore, a black paradigm serves an important function in getting to the heart of black issues and seeks to empower blacks in their struggles for equal status. When one thinks of how the black paradigm is perceived as being subordinate to the white one, one may be puzzled to understand that such a paradigm is even different from the current American foundations in political science. Who even says that there is a dominant paradigm that reflects mostly white, Western European ways of thinking? Actually, we do in fact think that the current paradigm can explain and even solve the mystery of an emergent black paradigm in the United States. To us, there is no perfect theory or paradigm. Perhaps even the black paradigm can be applied to issues facing Asian or Hispanic communities, or even those of whites in certain aspects.

How do we resolve some of the issues facing the black paradigm? Also, all across the board diversifying the material with black authors helps to strengthen the idea of alternative viewpoints. We think this helps us better, as it does students of any background, to understand issues surrounding the black community, not only in the United States, but in Africa as well.

1. ANALYSIS

The main concern of the author’s paper is that the prevailing worldview in political science comes from a Euro-Centric standpoint, especially considering the dominant paradigm in the United States. According to Mack H. Jones, this attitude is seen throughout politics, for whites are the dominant majority, therefore our ideas unconsciously influence all of society. In other words, we exercise our will throughout the world, disregarding the black viewpoint. The problem is that the “American” perspective carries a superiority complex with it, and others are subjugated to our will. The Third World always has problems, but not the Western world (?). We believe that if the former follows our routine, they can vastly improve their societies. However, this ideology is strongly European and may exclude a uniquely black approach, other minority approaches, and less prosperous Third World regions. Besides non-Western European paradigms, the rest of the world must accept that in such adversarial relationships, that those non-Western ethnicities or those regions have diverse backgrounds and perhaps rationalize differently, carrying an ideology that may clash with the prevailing capitalist system. For example, sometimes a capitalistic, free trade ideal “exacerbates competition and brings in its train considerable upheavals. The laws of the market, which are supposed to allow a better distribution of wealth, in fact cause work conditions and social policies to be leveled downward” (Schermann, et al., 2002). Coming from a subordinate standpoint, blacks will observe things differently than those who are in power (Jones, 1992, 37). Black approaches are still

yet to be appreciated within political science. Curiously, the white-centered capitalist society sees the plight of blacks as a nuisance. The dominant paradigm is often used to blame blacks and the Third World for lagging behind, for not “doing like we do.” However, we deny our standpoint’s limitations; the dominant system pushes out the underlying threat to its power. The current paradigm does not reflect a black view and should consider alternating theories to be equally viable, which could identify better solutions to problems like poverty and unemployment. Though the prevailing paradigm will unlikely consider others, other paradigms have emerged in recent decades, like diverse area studies programs; practical research applications are applied in many fields while funding becomes available for such projects. Public policy today is a critical field; many universities have made doctoral programs centering on policy issues (like the Joint Ph.D. program at Georgia Tech and Georgia State, along with Kent State). The dominant paradigm does not always prove correct; several different approaches could point out pluses and minuses. Jones even admits to the following statement about blacks, that “blacks would not be perceived merely as problems, rather, those values in the broader American culture that thwart black efforts effect change and the institutions to which they give rise would constitute the problems around which scholarly works would cohere (Jones, 1992, 37). This paradigm is perhaps over-exaggerated; maybe Jones is angry at the world for being unfair, but possessing blackness is probably harder than having whiteness at times. White people may possess advantages because of presumed biases that exist, but if people work hard enough in today’s society, they can overcome prejudice, maximizing their potential. Turning a blind eye towards discrimination, reminding oneself that no barriers exist, destroying each wall as just another obstacle helps. A valiant effort is required, but if people push hard enough, they can get what they want by believing there is no “glass ceiling.” Unfortunately, some believe that inner-city blacks are a problem rather than ordinary people who have identical hopes and ambitions that we all have; only a narrow worldview would teach the former. Racial problems are disappearing as other paradigms materialize today, which are unacknowledged at times, as Third World countries endure hardships when asking for money from international organizations, like the IMF and the World Bank. This is shown by the following example:

The poor countries, which have devoted their efforts to developing an export-oriented economy, to the establishment of duty-free areas or to agricultural specialization, have become deeply mired in debt. They have borrowed to build infrastructures so as to attract multinationals, and when the prices of their products fell, they had no further income to pay their debts. At the beginning of the eighties, these countries were constrained to re-negotiate their debt, and sign up new loans (Schermann, et al, 2002).

Why do Third World countries have such difficulties? The answers are obvious; these groups can be traced to long-established traditions deeply rooted (but not created in) in European countries and political systems, and since they forcefully implemented such systems very early on (especially on those countries which were subordinated to their rule), they have a major advantage in instilling their ideas globally, which has also trickled down to this country. It is obvious from observing the largest ethnic groups, which are German, Irish, English, and Italian, in the United States that we possess a Euro-Centric viewpoint. It is natural in most societies with a majority to reflect their values while protecting minority interests. We believe that we know of this dominant trend and seek to recognize other viewpoints, as seen in the upsurge in area specialization in the Middle East, East

Asia, and Africa today and what many school departments are offering in terms of courses and degree programs. Perhaps if Jones wrote this article today, he may have more to think about.

2 BLACK VS. WHITE RELATIONSHIP

The article addresses a black versus white adversarial relationship mostly in this country, with black interests subordinate to the white dominant viewpoint. Our society's values have infiltrated many others, creating an inferiority complex and imposing a form of "cultural imperialism"; also, a black paradigm concept is ignored by political science's current approach. Jones states that, in general, "Political science generally studies elites and the processes and channels through which decisions are made, and, given the fact that blacks have been deprived historically of elite status, it follows syllogistically that political science would give only limited attention to political activity and developments central to black political life (Jones, 1992, 26). This dominant ideal has alienated many, causing anger, making blacks think that we prefer a patrimonial, white-centered viewpoint, and it criticizes others, blaming them for not following the status quo. More political areas should reflect blacks' plight, especially in this country; we must form a new lens for political science. Thinking out of the box to observe change from a new perspective is beneficial. For example, though black income is rising, challenges remain such as when "intown neighborhoods gentrify and rising property values put economic pressure on low-income families" (Pearson, 2002). Some Western European theories disregard black problems in that we (whites) are in power and may use common stereotypes to study African-American problems, making a dilemma of applying the dominant viewpoint to black issues. As Jones says, "A political science grounded in the black definition of reality would of necessity raise different questions from those that emanate from the prevailing paradigm" (Jones, 1992, 32). The dominant paradigm seeks to vanquish that which threatens the one in power's legitimacy; a black perspective can question the dominant paradigm's standpoint. "Henry Mitchell and Nicholas Lewter claim that experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicle is a fundamental epistemological tenet in African American thought systems" (Collins, 2000, 193). Third World nations can then show how local paradigms can resolve some issues. Presumably, using the current approach to black problems in this country is similar to Europe applying their own structural principles to Africa's political systems, which ultimately led to chaos throughout the societies, war, instability, and breakdown of core foundational economic systems.

The core argument is that no black paradigm exists alongside a white one. A representative black paradigm can show faults in the dominant system, assisting the status quo in viewing from a culturally valued perspective. Jones thinks that a new paradigm "would facilitate our understanding of the American system not simply as a set of procedures with positive systemic outcomes as is the case with the dominant paradigm, but as a set of procedures whose systemic outcomes are both positive and negative" (Jones, 1992, 38). If a paradigm does not surface, it and the gaps in the current system die out. A black paradigm can seek the core black issues, empower blacks in the struggle for equality, and solve some of American blacks' difficulties. Appreciating this paradigm can provide inspiration for other minority peoples struggling in the world. Dr. Manning Marable, author of *Beyond Black and White*, sums up some of these issues as "access to affordable housing, public-health services, pride and personal safety, the quality of the environment, public transportation, and the education of our children" (Gazatteer, 1997, 1). We agree with the author in

developing certain paradigms, but many thrive today, yet the general public is still unaware. Universities and politicians still have work to do in divulging these ideas, in raising them equally amongst Euro-Centric theories, which helps in implementing varied research perspectives. This course increases our knowledge of black issues today and incorporates legitimate alternatives into our minds, helping us brainstorm data “out of the box” and consider other possibilities.

We refer to “we” because our cultural heritage reflects mostly multi-cultural backgrounds. The black perspective is challenging because we not merely African in heritage and face significantly less discrimination today, but we know that it still exists, so we broaden our horizons by talking to or reading the writings of minority ethnic groups. We remain color-blind when analyzing political issues, but a number of blacks still may see things differently. We cannot change our skin color but can critically examine the issues, imagining ourselves in another’s shoes when facing discrimination. However, we must confess that besides skin tone, any societal issue can be perceived as any race’s problem, like poverty, violence, drugs, or health care.

3. A DOMINANT PARADIGM?

The black paradigm may be subordinate to the white one, but we are perplexed: is it different from current American foundations in political science? A Euro-centric feel is typical of the dominant paradigm, but is an Afro-Centric viewpoint separate? Who is involved is the difference, and white-on-black oppression must be considered, but actually all skin tones can relate to poverty issues. For years immigrant groups were deprived of opportunities, like Irish and Italians; Jews faced disparities in property ownership and occupation choices in Europe. Today blacks struggle with racial issues, but they are not as complicated as in the Civil Rights era. Disparities still exist, as Atlanta city income for blacks is twenty points below the entire Fulton county area (Pearson, 2002). Other theories are being appreciated, as observed by the diversity of individuals in professorial roles, business, politics, and many other fields. Skin tone is sometimes a major issue, which we are somewhat familiar with, but numerous ways exist to research the dominant paradigm idea in political science. Is there a dominant, white paradigm? The current paradigm can explain why a black one appears to exist only in select corners; these other paradigms are merely sub-fields of the larger ideology. “Further, there is no reason why different conceptual frameworks should not be compatible, provided, of course, that one or another of them does not contain a hidden bias, a built-in evaluative scheme” (Meehan, 1967, 14). For example, Marx reflected concerns about individuals’ rights and the working man, which can be applied cross-culturally: “Marxism...has been verified in the subsequent practice of revolutionary class struggle and revolutionary national struggle” (Mao, 1937, 6). Also, Polanyi expresses desires and faults of capitalism in The Great Transformation. Marable would agree with Marx and maybe Polanyi with the following statement: “Millions of African Americans and millions of Latinos and poor people are desperately seeking working and living wages, black capitalism is a false solution...Petty capitalist enterprises will not generate jobs we need to effectively reduce mass unemployment” (Gazetteer, 1997). Marx and Polanyi were also non-capitalist and European. American writers like Upton Sinclair cared about the individual, laborers’ rights, and unions. Is there a perfect paradigm? The black paradigm can address similar issues of Asian, Hispanic, or even white communities at times. We believe all theories can provide solutions to many of society’s problems.

Further examination currently needs to be made on the social dynamics brought on by segregation paradigm vs. an integration paradigm within a society. The social parallels that exist among whites

and blacks during segregation are still prevalent in today's society causing greater political and even economic disparity. Issues such as gerrymandering, "white flight" and gentrification at times has caused a rift in integration efforts brought on legislatively by the Civil Rights Acts of the 60s. In addition, Historically Black Colleges and Universities that graduate high levels of minorities have suffered and struggled of late to secure needed funding or accreditation to level out areas of disadvantages among blacks and whites economically.

4 CONCLUSION

What will become of the black paradigm? Prominent public and private people can endorse alternative perspectives when developing new public policy. Leaders expressing tolerance and diversity help to foster cultural appreciation; to deny a dominant paradigm, that issues transcend race and gender, helps. Requiring a course that covers racial issues and culturally unique problems and incorporating class discussions as part of the research material are positives. At Clark Atlanta, we can find at least a few black authors in standard political science classes; our other schools, outside of many of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), focused mainly on American and European theorists. We are now more aware of global black issues. Requiring the material to be a certain type of author does not help; we believe one should leave it to the individual assigning the research. Assigning various authors broadens a student's viewpoint, which education should do at all levels. We stress education because this is the critical juncture, since youths become the business leaders, politicians, and teachers. Influencing the young prepares society itself for change; then the young, as cosmopolitan citizens, are ready to lead others. Atlanta displays a number of changes already, where an Atlanta Journal-Constitution poll shows that "black median household income in metro Atlanta increased by 25.6% during the 1990s," compared to only 14.2% for white households.¹ This should bring hope and a promise that prosperity will continue to come.

5 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We give thanks to those scholars who have inspired us for the ideas in this article, including Drs. Marvin Haire and Mack H. Jones.

6 REFERENCES

- [1] Collins, P. H. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." J. James and T. D. Sharpley-Whiting, eds., The Black Feminist Reader. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2000, pg. 193.
- [2] Jones, M. H. "Political Science and the Black Political Experience: Issues in Epistemology and Relevance." National Political Science Review, Vol. 3, 1992, pgs. 25-39.
- [3] Meehan, E. J. "The Structure of Political Thought.." Contemporary Political Thought: A Critical Study. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1967, pgs. 1-50.
- [4] Pearson, M. "Metro Blacks Close Income Gap with Whites." The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Sep. 17, 2002. <http://www.accessatlanta.com/ajc/metro/0902/17cenmain.html>
- [5] Schermann, J.-P., B. Strauss, Vitaly, P. Dwyer, K. Newby, N. Wolff, volunteer translators and J.-F. Druhenchaux. "Globalization of What, How and for Whom?" Montreal: Quebec Network on Continental Integration (RQIC), 2002. <http://attac.org/fra/toil/doc/rqicen14.htm>
- [6] "Toward a New Black Paradigm." Gazetteer: The Pennsylvania Gazette, Vol. 95, No. 4, February 1997. <http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/0297/0297gaz5.html>

¹ Pearson 1.

- 7] Mao, T.-T. “On Practice: On the Relation Between Knowledge & Practice, Between Knowing and Doing.” A Lecture at the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College, Yen-an, China, July, 1937.
