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## Racing Left and Right: Color-Blind Racism's Dominance across the U.S. Political Spectrum

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### ABSTRACT

To date there has been very little scholarship that (1) traces the color-blind rhetoric of liberal or progressive communities, or (2) emphasizes the mainstream, color-blind rhetoric of far-right conservative movements. This article compares the racial politics at two ends of the U.S. political spectrum in order to demonstrate how color-blind ideology constitutes the dominant framework for understanding and discussing race and racial inequality in the United States. This racial ideology transcends political party and ideology, but also motivates individuals to do identity work constructing themselves as transcending racism. Grounded in a racial formations framework, I compare two distinct political locations, one consisting of liberal Democrats and progressives in a diverse urban community and the other among Tea Party organizers in one state, in order to demonstrate the similarities in racial discourse and identities, despite differing political orientations and goals.

### KEYWORDS

Coded racism; color-blind racism; progressives; Tea Party

Many assume, given the depth of partisan politics in the United States, that liberals and conservatives must be profoundly different in their racial ideologies and attitudes. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that conservatives and liberals have developed different brains (Jost and Amodio 2012; Schreiber et al. 2013) and that our neural responses may even predict our political ideologies (Ahn et al. 2014). Others suggest that this may be a result of fundamentally different personality types that are thought to shape one's participation in these political parties (see Carney et al. 2008). While politically tempting, and likely comforting to those who are critical of the opposing party's social policies, evidence for these claims is lacking. While some political psychologists have themselves cautioned about these findings (Feldman and Johnston 2014), a more careful sociological analysis is clearly also needed.

This article compares the racial politics at two locations in the U.S. political spectrum in order to demonstrate how racial ideology, particularly the construction of a good white self, transcends political ideology for ordinary political actors. In particular, I demonstrate how the political differences between Tea Party organizers and those active in diverse urban communities share a language and framework for understanding race in the contemporary United States. This research is important given that, to date, there has been very little scholarship that (1) traces the color-blind rhetoric of liberal or progressive communities, or (2) emphasizes the mainstream, color-blind rhetoric of far-right

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conservative movements like the Tea Party. Hughey has explored similarities among apparently different political and racial groups, white nationalists and white antiracists, and suggests, “It is not that [these groups] are atypical—it is quite the opposite. These two groups demonstrate patterns of racial meaning making that more and more white Americans *might* share” (Hughey 2012:190; emphasis added). This article tests that claim by exploring the still-partisan middle ground between left and right.

Further, while there have been large-scale quantitative efforts to understand the relationship between political and racial ideology in the United States, few qualitative studies exist to help us compare these competing logics more deeply. While those studies have illuminated some important insights, they have not demonstrated the *shared* discursive and ideological frames that embedded social actors use in their movement and community work. Doing so can shed new light on these political projects, as well as on our own efforts in the scholarship to understand and challenge it. In particular, I emphasize how on both the left and right, color-blind ideology and coded racism are deployed in service of still-differing political goals. Moreover, those same efforts produce racist outcomes alongside the construction of good white selves—those who challenge and transcend racism rather than contribute to it.

### Race and Partisan Politics

Polling data suggest that the supporters of left and right political parties are indeed more similar than our partisan framework might assume. For example, recent data from the Pew Research Center (2015) suggest that, in the wake of rising public awareness of police violence and debate about the use of the Confederate flag, growing numbers of individuals in *both* major parties agree that more needs to be done in order to create racial equality. These data also suggest that the attitudes of both groups tend to rise or fall similarly in response to national events.

These partisan assumptions are not confined to public opinion; they also shape the way that we study left and right movements. For example, as Blee and Yates point out, there is a long history, still present in much scholarship today, that sees conservative movements “through the lens of psychology, even as this framework had been largely abandoned for studies of progressive social movements” (Blee and Yates 2015:128). That is despite the fact that, as McVeigh’s research on organized racism suggests, “it is reasonable to assume that social movement participants are at least as rational as the people who study them” (McVeigh 2004:905). While the racism exemplified by conservative movements like the Tea Party deserves our sharpest criticism, “if we focus *exclusively* on such vitriol, we will miss the issues raised by the New Right that we need to examine and address with as much attention as we give to grievances of other groups in society” (Hardisty 1999:42; emphasis added). Blee (2006:481) argues that “to understand the appeal of history’s most abhorrent movements, researchers need to account for the similarities of these to mainstream motivations and agendas.” This article makes precisely those connections.

At the other end of the political spectrum, liberals have received far less scrutiny by scholars, perhaps due to our assumptions that liberals are race-cognizant, or perhaps because of the tendency mentioned above to approach progressive and conservative political activity with a framework of *movements* rather than *psyches*. This has meant that, by and large, we have missed the several ways that liberals and progressives

participate in the same actions and rhetoric as those on the right. For example, Villenas and Angeles (2013:510) have found that both racist hate speech and the “benevolent liberal race talk” in one small, progressive community “mutually reinforce the logic of white racial dominance”; the research presented here further affirms this claim. Hughey’s (2012) study of white antiracists has found similarly troubling patterns of paternalism.

This overlap between political parties should not be surprising, in part because both Republicans and Democrats advance the neoliberal order. “Because liberals and conservatives are both defenders of capitalism, the differences that exist between them disappear as you go to the common root of their ideologies, the free marketplace” (Carr 1997:108). Even given the levels of police brutality and the growing movement to protect black and brown lives, both conservatives and liberals have enacted public *policy* that deepens racial inequality—advancing free trade agreements, diminishing the safety net and reducing welfare spending, punishing undocumented immigrants rather than those who recruit and hire them, increasing prison and military spending, and offering substantial bailouts and tax breaks to corporations in support of the capitalist marketplace. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this free market ideology works so seamlessly with the ideology of color-blind racism, which also emphasizes an abstracted notion of equal opportunity and individualism (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Both parties also tend to approach racism as a problem of the past, or as the product of fringe actors. As Carr (1997:109) pointed out: “Both conservatives and liberals condemn race reactionaries, people such as Klan members, and all those who subscribe to the evolutionary racist ideology... . Conservatives also agree with liberals in condemning the segregation laws of the Jim Crow period.”

That framework established, it remains important to consider the large, but in many ways disjointed, bodies of literature considering the relationship between race and politics. Political scientists have paid close attention to the relationship between racial attitudes and political ideology, but have found surprisingly few strong relationships. For example, racial resentments seem to have influenced voting in 2008, but their influence was exceeded by that of party identification (Knuckey 2011). Others (Mas and Moretti 2009) found no influence at all. Furthermore, racial attitudes tend to be highly variant, following what McDermott and Belcher (2014) call the rally and split pattern common to presidential cycles. Racial identity can affect political party preferences, but even there it does not necessarily influence one’s racial ideology (Magnum 2013).

This is not to say that political party is irrelevant to racial resentments or ideologies. Sears and Henry (2005) have argued that political conservatism is central to symbolic racism. White conservatives have also demonstrated stronger intergroup preferences in romantic relationships (Eastwick et al. 2009). Journalists Nate Silver and Allison McCann (2014) have also demonstrated that there is a partisan gap in responses to General Social Survey questions that are reasonable indicators for racial bias. But their quantitative research reveals the same trend that my qualitative data suggest here: the gap is not as large as we often assume. Moreover, as Blee and Yates (2015:130) argue, “emphasizing the racism of conservative activists can obscure the pervasive nature of racism across political boundaries.” In short, “there are white racists in both parties” (Silver and McCann 2014). Their work suggests that these attitudes did not decrease during Obama’s presidency, despite the hope of those proclaiming a “postracial” United States. Even in Hughey’s research comparing white antiracists and white supremacists, “both appeal to fairly normative and logical arguments to shield their activism” (Hughey 2012:3), and “members

of both organizations use the dominant understandings of race today to continually re-create and re-form both their individual and collective white racial identities” (Hughey 2012:3). While I will discuss some ways that my work here adds additional insights to Hughey’s, this important similarity is central to both of our findings.

It is also crucial to emphasize that even among Tea Party supporters, previous research has demonstrated that racial resentment, measured via established attitudinal scales, is not as strong as typically assumed. While racial resentment is statistically one of the strongest predictors of Tea Party membership (Tope, Pickett, and Chiricos 2015), it may not be prior racial resentment that led supporters to the movement. Instead, Knowles et al. (2013:2) argue “that political judgments (even initially principled ones) can influence racial attitudes and identity through a process of political radicalization.” So, Tea Party members tend to more strongly identify with their whiteness after participation in the movement, rather than as a casual driver into the movement. This supports Paul Croll’s (2007) findings that whites’ racial identity is most pronounced at either end of the political spectrum. Even so, Maxwell and Parent (2012), who use national survey data to trace the relationship between symbolic racism, racial stereotypes, and ethnocentrism, find no direct effects of racial animus on Tea Party membership. In short, the myriad assumptions about the Tea Party as being the party of racists, and of liberals or progressives exemplifying racial justice, tend to fail empirical testing. This study adds to the growing body of research around this claim, and connects it to the identity work that individuals undertake to construct a good white self amid the racism that is pervasive in each party.

### Color Blindness and Coded Racial Projects

How then do we make sense of these findings? In the contemporary United States, the dominant racial ideology is that of color blindness—the belief that today’s racial inequality is not a result of the legacy of racism or its contemporary manifestations, but rather the result of individual effort and perceived cultural differences. Bonilla-Silva (2003) has detailed four major discursive frames for colorblindness. They are abstract liberalism, the belief that we have achieved equal opportunity and therefore that individual merit and effort exclusively explain unequal outcomes; naturalization, the way that we tend to see racial dynamics, particularly segregation, as a matter of benign preference; cultural racism, which blames or credits perceived cultural differences for success or failure; and the minimization of racism, which directly asserts that racism is not a factor in ongoing racial inequality.

Bonilla-Silva’s framework has become dominant in our field, given its utility for making these frames visible. But as de Leon (2011:78) points out, “research on colorblind ideology and whiteness is largely silent on political parties.” This is especially true for studies of ordinary contemporary political actors inside of these parties. Paying closer attention to the ways in which color blindness is not only present but mobilized to support both identity work *and* racist projects in different places along the politics spectrum has the potential to reveal more about how racial inequality is maintained, particularly as that inequality falls in importance relative to the construction of a good white self.

This is again where Hughey’s (2012) previous work offers an important foundation. When Hughey studied white antiracists and white supremacists, he was examining self-conscious whiteness. While I am also looking toward two ends of the political spectrum in the United States, given that these groups were not overtly focused on their own race, I am

able to extend Hughey's analysis to examine taken-for-granted whiteness, which works somewhat differently. The matter is in degree: Hughey's samples are so far from center (focusing on white nationalists and white antiracists) that they do not necessarily help us to directly examine the middle—the less radical but still partisan differences between white liberals and white conservatives. Hughey helps us to further affirm Croll's (2007) claim that white identity is most salient at either end of the political spectrum, but my study looks toward the middle of that spectrum, where Croll has established less salience, to add further insights.

Those insights turn on color blindness to situate oneself as “one of the good ones” in race-focused conversations, but then racial codes are actively deployed to uphold the ideology of color blindness in racially infused political activity. As Omi and Winant (2015:218) note:

The rise of “code word” strategies was a logical next step, an effort to race-bait less explicitly, while making full use of the traditional stereotypes. “Code words” like “get tough on crime” and “welfare handouts” reasserted racist tropes of black violence and laziness without having to refer to race at all.

It is the larger framework of color blindness that makes codes seem necessary to those who deploy them. As Jane Hill (2008:33) also suggests: “Following Foucault, I assume that deep principles determine what components of the message are explicit, and what components are recovered through inference.” These racial codes have a precise logic, one that upholds color blindness to make specific political claims.

In this way racial codes are often deployed as a strategy in creating an effective political strategy, or a racial project. As long as the discourse itself remains race-evasive, its still-racialized meanings and outcomes can be enacted. As such, the racial formations framework helps us to situate the ever-contested meanings of race within the structures of the larger society where these meanings are mobilized and matter. As Omi and Winant write in their most recent edition of *Racial Formations* (2015:121), “Our notion of racial formations foregrounds the ongoing political contestation that takes place between the state and civil society—across the political spectrum—to define and redefine the very meaning of race.” While the racial formations framework has been critiqued in recent years (see Feagin and Elias 2013), it remains useful for understanding the hegemonic process of mobilizing racial ideologies in service of particular outcomes, which remain racialized as a result. It can illuminate the hegemonic process wherein preferred racial ideology is mobilized toward concrete ends.

This does not just take place at the broad and seemingly intangible level of “ideology” and hegemony. It takes place through distinct racial projects, which “connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structure and everyday experiences are racially organized, based on that meaning” (Omi and Winant 1994:56). Racial projects mobilize a particular meaning of race in order to justify concrete political or other social outcomes; for this reason, political projects are very often also racial projects. In other words, it is through racial projects that color-blind racism is deployed in concrete social settings, therefore perpetuating the larger system of color blindness as a neoliberal feature.

In the Tea Party, these racial projects connect to distinctly yet covertly racialized political issues such as welfare, immigration, and national security. It is the politics of

welfare and welfare resentment that will be closely examined in this article, in part because the discourse that surrounds it connects so closely to the racial projects of those liberals or progressives active in diverse Chicago neighborhoods. While the community activity and organizing among liberals in Chicago centers on a range of issues, even seemingly race-neutral projects of gardening and “beautification” take on a racial politics when they are connected to matters of blight and public housing. Further, both the Tea Party and the liberals in diverse Chicago neighborhoods are also directly connected to issues of safety and policing, which they both perceive and act to shape in race-driven ways. This article examines those racial projects on the left and right as they seek to advance policy goals, at the level of their concrete, everyday political activity. In both cases, political actors draw on color-blind and coded racism to justify these racial projects while they simultaneously assert themselves as white people who transcend racism.

## Methods

This article integrates data from two separate research projects that I have conducted within the past decade—one from a stably racially diverse community in Chicago whose liberal and even progressive politics are an important part of the community’s identity, and one of Tea Party organizers working throughout the state of Illinois. Both studies focused specifically on those most active in these communities or movements, given my interest in racial projects (Omi and Winant 1994), or how racial ideology is transformed into sociopolitical action. I began with those individuals who were identified or apparent as leaders in each setting, and from there used snowball sampling to gain other similarly situated respondents—those who were actively involved in each political field.

Despite my framework that sought to connect racial ideology and discourse to social action, neither study asked participants questions about race specifically, but rather how they came to be involved in the community/movement and what issues were important to them in their work. From there, most participants discussed race or race-focused issues, which I believe yields more authentic results than asking individuals to respond to questions about race broadly or to fit their perspectives or experiences onto a racial attitudes scale. After all, social acceptability would likely have made discussions about their racial attitudes and beliefs even more color-blind. Both data sets were coded with respect to the specific issues that emerged and to the forms of racial discourse or ideology that they expressed. While expressions of racial ideology were remarkably similar in both communities, their distinct characteristics are important to detail below.

## *Racially Diverse Chicago Communities*

During 2007 and early 2008, I conducted 42 interviews with the most active members of three adjoining stably racially diverse communities in the northeast area of Chicago. These communities are important sites for study, given their rare stably racially diverse demographics (see Nyden, Maly, and Lukehart 1997). While diversity is increasing in the country as a whole, deep segregation persists, and most neighborhoods or communities only briefly become diverse as they transition from one demographic to another. Significantly, these Chicago neighborhoods that I studied proudly claim both racial diversity and their liberal politics as important elements of the communities’ identities.

This makes the way that people are enacting racial diversity particularly salient in these settings. By the same token, I did not ask individual participants about their political affinities, given my interest in how they were implementing diversity- and race-related activities. However, most were clear Obama supporters, and markers of these liberal or progressive politics were made visible in both their homes (via signs during the 2008 presidential campaign, Pride flags and other diversity memorabilia, etc.), in their statements about politics more broadly, and the content of their political activity.

This political activity was not a national movement as it was for the Tea Party organizers in my sample, but rather was organized around working with their alderman's office or in local block clubs; on green movements like community gardens and other environmental issues; on supporting local businesses and resisting big-box and other mega-scaled development; and on issues of public parks, safety, and transit. While none of these projects are exclusively liberal, the organizers I spoke to in this neighborhood also forged a discourse that was proud of the liberal politics of the community and the community's diversity. Many of them also spoke with frustration about the conservative bloggers and political candidates in the community, whom they feel do not represent the community or its values.

Despite that commitment to racial diversity, most of those who are most active in these communities—30 of the 42—are white. With only one exception, I quote those white residents in this article. I do this for several reasons. First, the Tea Party sample is an all-white sample, because I did not meet any people of color who were active in the movement at the time. This allows a better basis for comparison to the white residents in these liberal communities, which is the core argument in this article. Second, as I compared color-blind discourses, I began to notice not just the prevalence of color blindness but also the active construction of a good white self against the specter of racism that white organizers in both parties must contend with, particularly given that their political activity around diversity or racially loaded policy issues make race harder to ignore (see Eichstedt 2001). People of color also produced color-blind discourse in this community, as they have elsewhere been shown to do, but they also reckon daily with the stereotypes and controlling images about their racial group in our racialized social system. This helps us to understand how whites may be prompted to do so only in spaces like these, which again is an important framework for this analysis as we situate this identity construction alongside broader political activity and discourse.

### ***Tea Party Organizers in Illinois***

The second sample from which I pull data in this article is based on a study of Tea Party activists, who were dispersed throughout the state of Illinois and working to influence voters, to train and support far-right conservative candidates, and in some cases around specific issues. While not living together in a community area like those in the Chicago neighborhoods discussed above, they very much share an identity as conservative Tea Partiers, and often attend events such as rallies and conventions together throughout the state. Field notes from those events form part of my data set, but the majority come from the 25 people whom I interviewed throughout the state. While 25 may not seem like many, recall that these are specifically those who are most active in what are often rural or otherwise dispersed community areas throughout the state. By the time I ended the data

collection phase of my research in late 2011, I had a relatively even saturation of geographical areas and began to hear the same names recommended to me, indicating that I had been in contact with and interviewed most of those who are most active in shaping Tea Party politics in the state.

Among them, all were white and most seemed to be middle class, as evidenced by the homes in which I visited them, their occupational status if shared, and other social clues. While I heard chatter about some people of color who were active organizers in the state, none of these otherwise well-connected organizers knew the names or contact information for these organizers, leading me to suspect that their numbers and influence were inflated for the appearance of diversity. Women constituted 15 of my 25 participants, and my book about the Tea Party devotes an entire chapter to their influence and the gender dynamics, which have received much less attention than their racial politics. That said, it was my interest in their racial politics and discourse that led me to begin studying the movement in Illinois in the first place, and of course those are the findings that I discuss here. Both studies had other relevant findings that are available in the books and other articles I have published about each (Burke 2015; Burke 2013; Burke 2012a; Burke 2012b; Burke 2010), but the commonality in their racial ideologies and discourse is important to detail in this article, as few studies to date have specifically drawn these connections. These findings are presented below.

## Findings

As Omi and Winant (2015:125) note, “Every racial project is both a reflection of and response to the broader patterning of race in the overall social system.” In this section, I demonstrate how color blindness is central to the racial projects on the left and the right, despite different political goals. In the findings sections below, I first emphasize how these political actors work toward the construction of a good, color-blind white self. This provides the framework for exploring how those selves act to shape their local political environments in racial projects, particularly through opposition to welfare and policing black bodies.

### *Construction of a (Good, White) Color-Blind Self*

Emergent research is beginning to parse the difference between color blindness as an identity and as an ideology (Croll 2016). Such maneuverings often begin from a noble intention to disavow racism or, as Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, to judge someone by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. While this has been disastrous for social policy (e.g., in housing, see Anderson 2004 and Gottlieb 2013; in education, see Zamudio and Rios 2006 and Stoll 2013), it forms an important part of one’s identity in political spaces, where identities are also closely fused with the local political projects where they are embedded.

Take, for example, Denise, a white woman in Chicago who is active in her local block club:

Denise: I mean, we are really color blind. We are, you know, there just—there isn’t the ... you don’t hear about the hatred and the unfortunate remarks that are made elsewhere because it’s a family here. It’s a family here.

Author: And why do you think that is?

Denise: Because we're—we tolerate. We tolerate. Our differences are acute, but we tolerate each other. And it doesn't matter to us that you're a gay man or a black woman. It doesn't matter to us. You're a person. And that's who you have living here.

What Denise misses, of course, is that one's racial identity deeply influences the way in which marginalized people are perceived and treated in social spaces, including in her proudly liberal community. She also fails to appreciate, perhaps given her racially privileged position as a white woman, how dismissing one's identity can also erase the experiences and necessary standpoints that her "tolerance" framework suggests. That said, it remains important to her to emphasize instead how the identity of the community, which she represents among its local leadership, disavows racism and embraces diversity.

This might be expected in a liberal community, given the wider perception of liberals as those advocating diversity and social justice. Note, then, how similar the following comment seems from Barb, a white Tea Party activist:

One of the things I want to say is that when the last presidential election process was going on, I really didn't know for sure who I was going to vote for. I wasn't particularly fond of McCain, and I didn't feel that I knew enough about Obama, but I thought, when he got elected, I thought this is great. For the first time, we have a black family in the White House, and I thought that was great. And that the country is—that's a sign that we've moved beyond a lot of that racism. And we need to, completely, and it needs to be done with.

While sociologists have long criticized the notion of a postracial America buttressed by Obama's election (see Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011), it is still remarkable that even a Tea Party activist was celebrating his family's tenure in the White House. This demonstrates not only the desire of Tea Party activists to mitigate the common perception of their movement as racist but also the importance for Barb to construct her self-identity as one that opposes racism and celebrates diversity.

Of course, Barb's comment is also a near-verbatim expression of Bonilla-Silva's (2003) minimization of racism frame—a hallmark of color-blind discourse. For that reason, it is also important to demonstrate the same color-blind frame in prodiversity social and political spaces like Chicago:

Fortunately, there isn't as much, I don't see as much of that now. I think race is not the issue that it was before. You know, I don't know. I mean, it was more of an issue—what are we talking about? The '70s? The ... 20, 30 years ago? It was more of an issue then. For, I'm not talking about for me. It was never a big deal for us. Um, but for the people that it was a big deal for, it doesn't seem to be as big a deal for anymore. (Patty, a white woman active in block club organizing)

Notice two important components of Patty's comments about the neighborhood and community. The first, of course, is the direct expression of color-blind frames arguing that "the past is the past" (Bonilla-Silva 2003:77). But Patty is also deliberate in situating her own identity as a color-blind individual inside of the color-blind politics of the neighborhood, constructing a good, white self in ways that echo across party divides.

Very similarly, Bob, a white Tea Party activist, had been talking in broad terms about valuing freedom, when I asked him to provide me with some clarity about what he meant. He said:

The American dream is that everybody should be free to strive for what they want and achieve it if they're willing to meet the demands of what they're striving for. I'm not talking about anybody's skin color or ethnicity or anything like that. That should be the dream of every man.

While Bob's comments are somewhat less direct in the construction of a self-identity, they do represent a racial consciousness or awareness that becomes important when situating his viewpoints on political matters. They are also color-blind in their near-direct expression of abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

However, once again, deliberate constructions of a good, white self were also common in the Tea Party, especially given the many allegations of the movement's racism. Ted and Shirley, both white, were talking about the widespread perceptions of their movement as racist and said:

Shirley: And the reason we have Herman Cain is to show we're not racist. It's like, oh, good lord, get real. I love Herman Cain because of Herman Cain. I don't care about his color. I don't even care about Obama's color.

Ted: Nobody does. Nobody cares about the color of somebody's skin. The only thing we care about is what are your values, what are your principles, what is it that makes you ... that makes you want to serve this country.

Of course, these ideals are far from reality for any of us in a racialized social system. But upholding this discourse of color-blind intent is crucial to the racial politics and personal identities of political movements across the mainstream, on both the left and the right. As such, it is important to emphasize how this construction of a personal color-blind identity supports the color-blind strategies of these political projects as a whole. It also reveals the urgency that political actors inside of each movement seem to feel to situate themselves as "one of the good ones," one who seeks to live up to the ideals of color blindness and to position their movements as legitimate on that basis.

Unfortunately, when the racial projects of each political field are more carefully considered, these good white selves do not always translate into political activity that helps each group enact these color-blind ideals. The Tea Party is strongly motivated in their opposition to welfare, immigration, and Islam—all of which heavily rely on racial codes, as well as sometimes overtly racist imagery and discourse, to drive this political activity. In diverse Chicago neighborhoods, political activity centers around crime and blight—both of which are similarly racially coded and also reveal the underlying preference for the preservation of one's property values and sense of safety above and beyond collective community efforts that would sustain the diversity that they so proudly embrace. In the following sections, I will explore welfare antagonism and community policing efforts in both communities to explore how coded racism upholds an adherence to colorblind discourses and self-identities, but in ways that subvert rather than advance the ideals embraced by the white good selves who express them.

### ***Racialized Welfare Antagonism***

I begin with an extended example in order to demonstrate how racial codes can be deciphered, and how a renegotiation of a good white self can be reasserted when such codes are cracked. Notice first how Joanne, a white Tea Party organizer, does not specifically mention race or any racial groups when expressing her strong opposition to welfare:

Joanne: But we see firsthand, by virtue of where we live, that there are literally hundreds of thousands of people who are making a career of taking benefits from the government, and they laugh at us because we pay tax, because we're employed and we pay into the system. They really feel like we're stupid because we don't know how to get the money out of the government.

Author: That's what they say, or ...?

Joanne: Yes. I've been in their homes. I have seen this. I have talked to these people. Just three streets over it starts.

Because I had driven to her house, I had passed the area that I suspected she was talking about, and asked, "I think I actually saw the area that maybe you're talking about. It was low-income, predominantly black, it looked like. Was that the area you're talking about?"

This cracked the racial code, and prompted her color-blind response, one that acknowledges the racial dynamics of her statement but insists on a nonprejudiced stance:

Well, I don't know if it's predominantly black, just a lot of black people in there. I'm not really racist. I mean, yes, I think a lot of people are black that do this, but I think that there's a lot of black people who are professional people and working and have good ethics, too. I'm not going to say because a person's black that they don't have ethics or values... . We're having two kids because we can't afford the day care to have more than two kids. They're having 10 because they get so many per month for each kid, so when they have a new baby, that money that they get from the government for having that baby represents a payment on a car or a washer or a television. It's a different way of living.

Of course, her insistence that she is not racist is at odds with her claim that her value system differs from those of the imagined welfare cheats that she racialized. But her color-blind *discourse* remains intact, and she scrambles to assert herself as a good white person, who is "not really racist" and is still wanting to decouple race from assumptions about ethics, even as she folds those two things back together in the same moment.

This is not just about a "gotcha" moment, revealing racism that undergirds welfare opposition, though sociological frame analysis in the era leading up to welfare reform has quite clearly established those undercurrents (see Gans 1995 and Quadagno 1994). It is also about the deliberate deployment of color-blind strategies to support racially driven opposition to public policy commitments.

And, of course, such opposition is strong in the Tea Party. But this opposition is careful to adhere to color-blind discourses and ideologies discursively. Notice how Ron, a white Tea Party activist, does not explicitly mention race in his comments:

I can take you over to the areas in the Quad Cities right now where there are second and third generations of nothing more than people intending to sit there for the rest of their lives and get money from me. And that's not, in my opinion, what it was intended to do. The reason for welfare was to help somebody out when they needed it. Now, there are going to be some people that will be permanent. Let's say a vet who's disabled. You want to help him. A widow or somebody temporarily out of a job. You need to help them up. There again economically, you want to keep the velocity of money going to help the economy.

Rather than drawing on the explicit racialized notions that are pervasive in the political landscape that surrounds us, Ron draws instead on notions about the deserving rather than the undeserving poor. This helps him to take a discursively moral position on what is a deeply racially charged issue. In that way, coded racism is crucial in upholding color-blindness. After all, Ron would likely eagerly assert that, of course, disabled veterans and

widows and the temporarily unemployed come from all racial groups. But this does not alter the reality that pervasive notions of the deserving and undeserving poor remain deeply racialized.

Perhaps such discourse is not surprising from the Tea Party, especially given how racially charged such matters remain in the recent election of Donald Trump. But it is this same partisan landscape that would lead many to suspect that those in liberal communities would never say such things. While I indeed heard a number of racially coded comments in the interviews I conducted in that community, perhaps those of Matthew, a politically active white man in his local block club who worked in a social justice-oriented local agency, are the most revealing:

I remember I had this very significant ... conversation with one of the neighbors who I just assumed was this, like, sort of progressive open-minded person because she was really into gardening and was really this kind of earthy person. And she just was so antagonistic towards Section 8 families and low-income families... . And it was shocking to me. I couldn't even imagine that people like that existed in the neighborhood who are progressive people.

As a researcher in this community, it was not shocking to me, as Matthew was not the only one to disclose such conversations that he had witnessed or been a part of in these liberal, diverse Chicago communities. And yet his comments here are especially revealing because he explicitly states that his perception of this woman as one of the “progressive people” was challenged by her deep antagonism toward those in public housing, or who are otherwise poor, in their community. These are largely families of color.

This way of thinking was common, and public housing, a form of welfare spending, was often the central way that political activity was racialized in these liberal communities. Evelyn, a white woman in Chicago, had been talking about areas in her neighborhood still needing improvement, and she said:

I mean, [we] still have a way to go on Winthrop and Kenmore. And here's the issue, you know, that you get into racial and I think that the problem of—of, um, Kenmore and Winthrop is partially racial, but racial in the sense that the hooligans and the bad people have made an impact in the area. And there are plenty of nonwhites that are very good citizens and want a safe, clean place to live just like everybody else. Um, but—but somehow or another with the [public housing] you got the, uh, uh, wrong element of the black community in there.

This notion of the “wrong element” frequently functioned as a racial code in this diverse, progressive Chicago neighborhood. In addition, the use of the word “jungle” among white residents to refer to predominantly black areas in their community was so commonplace that I suspect its racial undertone connecting black people to animals was rarely even questioned. It also linked directly not just to political opposition to welfare programs as in the Tea Party but also to the direct policing of black bodies in these “tolerant” diverse communities—where activists celebrate their good white selves while contributing directly to the disenfranchisement and disproportionate punishment of people of color.

## Racialized Policing

It is in this way that the coded race talk among these communities is not just a matter of discourse—it translates directly into social action, specifically in the policing of young black male bodies. Adam, a white man in his liberal Chicago community, was talking about his range of community involvement and said:

I mean, we sit on our porches at night ... and if somebody would just loiter in the street, or they didn't look like they belonged in the neighborhood, and they were talking too loud—like, I remember one night some teenagers were cussing, using foul language, so I called the police. You know, it was just that just constant pounding.

Adam, whether deliberately or unconsciously, sidesteps any mention of race, but it is hard to imagine how the race of one's body is not used as a marker of belonging in these neighborhoods that, while diverse, are also quite segregated on the block-by-block level.

More important, his “constant pounding” has an aggregate effect not just in the ongoing perception of raced bodies but in interactions with the police that can have lasting consequences for these black and brown teenagers (see Alexander 2010). Significantly, this comes from the very same “good white people” who tout their own values and those of their community as places that value diversity. For example, Denise, the white woman in the beginning passage who emphasized tolerance, was quite detailed in her description of the policing efforts in her community relative to a nearby high school that brought large numbers of black youth into the neighborhood:

It's that kind of a thing where the hooligans are going like this [middle finger] to us. And they're also in the [park by the school]... . And then I went to the beat meeting on it, and then I'm gonna go to another beat meeting on it and say, you know, they're—these hooligans—they're pelting youngsters with stones. Let's increase your patrols for an indefinite period of time. And now it's getting warm, so ...

As is characteristic of coded racism, Denise does not say that “hooligans” are black. But Anthony, a black man who lives in the same community area as Denise and occasionally works with her, affirmed how common her perception is:

The [Local] High School kids, they're good kids. However, when they come in and out, the bad element hides and mixes in between with them. So from the little old lady perspective, oh, those bad [Local] High School kids, and the [other] kids are angels. That's not necessarily true, but that's the perception.

In this way, Anthony affirms the perception of “the bad element” that is echoed so strongly throughout this diverse urban community, where these “little old ladies” like Denise (who had gray hair and was retired), encourage the police to monitor these youth, who are predominantly black and brown.

In this way, “teenagers” and “hooligans” signal age as a proxy for race, but markers of social class do the same work in mobilizing coded racial discourse to uphold color blindness and in the careful management of one's self as a good white person. Angela, a white woman also in Chicago, was describing some of the early advice that she got about living in her neighborhood when she said:

It, um, certainly a mixed neighborhood where some streets being, uh, had been warned about absentee landlords, and uh, said “Be careful when you go down that street” and, where there

was, you know, sort of a seemingly rougher clientele living on certain streets and others, you know, more kind of the university or professional looking people.

Given the years that I spent living and working in this neighborhood as one of those university people, I was even myself able to decode which blocks Angela was likely referencing, and the material markers of those who looked professional. These tend to be racial markers, even though she did not mention race. And, as she also suggests, these notions about who is “rougher” and who is not provide residents with a deeply racially driven sense of who will be received with caution.

It is crucial to emphasize, then that this caution is not only in one’s mind, but translates directly into neighborhood activity. As John, a white man in Chicago, reported:

There was one meeting that I sat at that it was, we were all white, and we were talking about safety, and “these people,” and “the element,” and those words kept being used. And there was other stuff being discussed, it wasn’t just that. And I was sitting there somewhat quiet ... finally somebody said, John, you’ve been very quiet, that’s not typical of you, what are you thinking? And finally I said, I’m thinking I’m very uncomfortable sitting here, because if anyone ever heard this, I think they’d think we were a bunch of racists.

John admits an awareness of the racial codes that were being used in this talk about race, segregation, and crime. He helps to crack the code and to confirm the otherwise invisible racial content of discourse around “the element” that, as his story also reveals, so deeply drives activity around crime. He helps to name it as not just racial but racist, even in his liberal, ostensibly prodiversity community.

In this way, it is only the (still rare) explicit naming of racial groups that really differentiates the discourse in the Tea Party from that of these “tolerant” liberal Chicago communities. Betty, a white Tea Party activist, was talking about her hesitation to attend protests in some areas of her community, saying:

Because here in [this community] there’s a lot of shooting going on, and it’s among the drug dealers, and a lot of them are African American people in their little village down there. They’re killing each other off. And when I go down there, I get nervous. And this is kind of close to the area that we were holding our signs, so ...

Betty’s nerves are based on strongly racialized fears of urban communities, and her dismissive comments about segregation as “their little village” are deeply problematic. But the underlying logic is, in the end, no different from those in liberal Chicago communities who talk about “the jungle” and persist in their “constant pounding” and cooperation with police in beat meetings to police black bodies.

## Discussion

While there have been several studies of coded racism and its prevalence, especially on the right, it remains crucial to emphasize its functional role in maintaining color blindness. It is incredibly difficult to maintain a purely color-blind stance, particularly when discussing matters like welfare or immigration, when racial inequalities and racist imagery permeate political discourse. Racial codes allow these deeply racialized social issues to be discussed in seemingly race-neutral terms, thereby preserving color blindness as an important moral

stance. Functionally, this also allows the individual discussing these racialized matters to maintain an identity as a good person—someone who is tolerant and not racist.

Of course, as discussed above and in many other spaces, tolerance is rarely useful in attaining social justice or individual happiness and security, particularly for those who are marginalized. However, crucially, neither social justice nor the happiness and security of people of color is as important in these settings as the preservation of the noble and good white individual who sets herself up as the tolerant nonracist. “The construction of identity at the same time contains an aspiration to differentiate oneself from the rest of the world and to be recognized by it” (Della Porta and Diani 2006:106). For Tea Party organizers, they establish themselves as the true, patriotic Americans defending our cherished values of individualism; for those in progressive Chicago communities, their identity work is as a beacon of tolerance and diversity. Color blindness is a useful tool in championing each of these moral stances, which are also mobilized to coconstruct individual identities. Color blindness is then also a celebration of an individual self.

That self, as my findings demonstrate, is at times more important than those political ideals being professed. This shows up in several important ways. The organizers and other active residents in liberal, diverse Chicago communities call the police when black and brown bodies pass down their block. They push for neighborhood change that supports gentrification and undermines the preservation of the racial diversity that they take as a matter of both personal and community pride. They resist public housing as a matter of safety and blight. And they do so while celebrating their tolerance, their good white selves.

The Tea Party, of course, uses these color-blind values to push for even more radical neoliberal policy that they imagine favors hard work and individualism, further contributing to the widening of racial gaps in wealth, income, education, incarceration, and a host of other inequalities. They use the racial fears that they and so many others, including those in liberal Chicago neighborhoods, have internalized in order to disregard black lives. And they proudly embrace Herman Cain, Ben Carson, and other black conservatives, as well as maintain that their opposition to Obama has nothing to do with race. It already seems clear that a Trump presidency will deepen these policies and that, as a result, racism will continue to flourish.

Even given that reality, and the tremendous focus on partisan differences and race in recent years, it is somewhat surprising that there are not more scholarly, sociological studies that specifically compare racial discourse and ideology across the political spectrum. This is also an affirmation of Feldman and Johnston’s (2014) claim that unidimensional approaches to understanding political orientations or dispositions are limited—economic, social, and other contingent variables are crucial for a deep understanding of the fickle political behavior of the United States. Indeed, despite the research suggesting that we have fundamentally different personalities and/or brain types and therefore political orientations, a more nuanced sociological analysis of left and right political discourse is still needed—I have offered one such analysis in this article, but others like it must follow if we are to truly address the undercurrents that led to a Trump presidency.

That is, while we know that color blindness is harmful, its presence on the left has been far less documented than on the right. Further, we have also tended to assume that the far right exclusively housed “traditional” racism—the racism that is overt rather than color blind. Instead, this article demonstrates how color-blind ideology and its coded discourse constitutes the dominant framework for understanding and discussing race and racial

inequality in the United States, transcending both political party and differences in political ideology. After all, were both ends of our political spectrum really different in their ways of talking and thinking about race and racial inequality, we might see policy suggestions that could begin to shift the decades-long racial status quo. Instead, racial inequality has persisted and grown since the Civil Rights Era, without regard to a Republican or Democratic Congress or presidency. Tracing this ideology across party lines, as I have done here, can help us to further make sense of the persistence of racial inequality despite differing party control in the White House and Congress. Moreover, the discourse of political actors on the left and right reveal that color blindness is not just a strategy for talking about their work and community settings, but perhaps more important, for talking about *themselves*.

In the end, as Omi and Winant (2015:211) assert, “The hegemony of neoliberal economics is matched and underwritten by the racial hegemony of colorblindness.” The policies proposed by progressives and liberal Democrats and conservative Tea Party folks differ, to be sure. But it is crucial that we recognize the many ways that their racial discourse and ideologies are shared. Holding the far right up as an example of deviant race talk or racial ideology rather than as just one element in the pervasive racialized social system was a core point of caution in Bonilla-Silva’s influential early work: “[When] racism is conceived of as a belief with no real social basis, it follows that those who hold racist views must be irrational or stupid... . This view allows for a tactical distinction between individuals with the ‘pathology’ and social actors who are ‘rational’ and racism-free” (1997:468). This article directly compares seemingly different political spaces, and demonstrates that neither are pathological or racism-free. They are part of the very same racialized social system.

## Notes on Contributor

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