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Tali Mendelberg, **THE RACE CARD: CAMPAIGN STRATEGY, IMPLICIT MESSAGES, AND THE NORM OF EQUALITY**, New Jersey, U.S. 08540: Princeton University Press, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001, vii-xi + 307pp. £11.95 (paper); £35.00 (cloth).

As recent electoral campaigns in the UK suggest the idea of the 'race card' has wide social and political currency but very little analytical rigour. The accusation of 'playing the race card' is almost universally understood to be appealing unfairly or immorally to 'race' in order to gain an electoral advantage. What remains unresolved is whether 'race' is an empirical-social category around which electoral divisions can be structured or whether it is a discursive construction or rhetorical trope within which (newly *articulated*) racisms can be reconfigured? Broadly speaking, political scientists tend to advocate the former, whereas poststructuralist/postmodernists tend to advocate the latter (with sociologists somewhere in the middle)! What is both engaging and important about Tali Mendelberg's study is that it appears to breach this divide but in the end not as much as one would have wished. This is not to suggest that this is not an important study (for it clearly is) but one that pushes at the boundaries of Political Science, in order to enlarge them rather than to question what they are protecting.

Mendelberg's research (the book reports her PhD) is built around a particularly rich case study: the 'Weekend Pass' campaign run by the Bush team during the 1988 U.S. elections, which exploited the case of Willie Horton, a black prisoner awaiting trial who attacked a middle aged white couple, raping the woman, while on parole. Mendelberg's argument is that the footage of Horton's arrest used to accompany the Bush campaign was not explicitly presented as 'racial' but as a 'law and order' issue. Indeed the propensity of the majority white electorate to 'read' the footage as racial depended crucially on the absence of explicit reference to 'race'. This 'implicit' racial communication worked because it primed white voters deeply held resentments about blacks without appearing to do so. It was only when the racial dimension was made explicit, by being challenged, that it lost its power to influence.

This case study cues Mendelberg's central argument: 'When a society has repudiated racism, yet racial conflict persists, candidates can win by playing the race card only through implicit racial appeals. The implicit nature of these appeals allows them to prime racial stereotypes, fears and resentments while appearing not to do so' (p. 4). Race card strategies are those that attempt to tap into the unacknowledged contradiction between a public commitment to racial egalitarianism and *de facto* racial conflict rooted in social structure. The boundary expanding aspects of the book lie in Mendelberg's controversial claim that,

given the current U.S. electoral landscape, 'race' is the one issue that can swing outcomes. Thus implicit racial appeals are predictable when (i) dominant norms prohibit explicit messages and (ii) politicians are motivated by electoral gain. The problem for the Democrats is that in order to neutralize implicit racial appeals they must render 'race' a visible factor and thereby undermine the fragile alliance between economically unequal 'racial' groups on which their political fortunes are built.

The book is clearly organised into three sections. Part one examines the historical emergence of implicit racial appeals, whereas part two examines their electoral impact, part three, the implications of such analysis. Mendelberg substantiates her arguments through critical analysis of (i) historical literature and (more persuasively) (ii) voter profile data, derived from various national data bases, as well as some innovative audience 'experiments'. Throughout, Mendelberg convincingly demonstrates how statistical data can be interrogated to reveal the dynamics of implicit racial appeals (the research procedures employed as well as details of the survey questions are usefully included).

This book attempts something new and innovative within political science but it does so through a careful deployment of theoretical and methodological procedures acceptable to political scientists. But are norms, voting psychology and political strategy sufficient to explain what is going on in racialized communication? The limitations of the political science framework are most apparent when Mendelberg argues (surely rightly) that a racial appeal is to be defined not by motivation or outcomes but by 'content' (p.12). This leads Mendelberg into making statements such as, 'The crucial racial element of the Horton story – the element sufficient to render the story racial – was Horton's race' (p. 147). To fully comprehend the significance of this would require Mendelberg to embrace qualitative approaches, such as semiotics, ideology and discourse analysis. It should also be noted that other scholars (Barker, Reeves, van Dijk, Smith and myself) have raised the issue of implicit racial communication in politics but, with the exception of van Dijk, they are not acknowledged here. The 'implicit' question posed by this impressive study is whether racialized political communication can be understood within the confines of any single academic tradition?

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