

## **Chapter 5 – The Political Geography of Racial Polarization**

Racial competition, regardless of the form it takes, is destructive to individual rights. By definition, it constitutes jockeying for social goods based upon ascriptive group membership rather than personal merit.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore a valid social problem for scholars to “solve.” Each form of conflict, however, invokes different historical lessons and implies unique policy solutions. Before the cure comes the diagnosis. This chapter promotes one valuable diagnostic tool, currently underutilized in political science: political geography. The discipline can make an important contribution to understanding modern race relations by restoring the geographical analysis of racial polarization to its former prominence.

Two particular exchanges in social psychology bear on the political geography of racial polarization, debates so important that any contemporary scholarly effort in the area must speak to them. Unfortunately, these debates involved the white backlash hypothesis only obliquely. The first, an implicit struggle over the “contact hypothesis,” percolated into the 1960s. Supporters of the idea, which social scientists used to justify federal desegregation policy, seldom if ever tried to reconcile their work with contradictory backlash theories. They did, however, grapple with contradictory empirical evidence, eventually qualifying the purported benefits of interracial contact so much that the hypothesis possesses few clear political implications. The second is a more confrontational battle over whether racism is “symbolic,” or oriented toward group privilege. It reached a boil in the early 1980s

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that some political scientists endorse “interest-group liberalism.” Their embrace of pressure-group politics usually stops short of permitting ethnic groups to use the state’s power against each other, however—if not because of any particular fastidiousness against rule by brute force, then perhaps because “whites” constitute a majority faction. Regardless, reducing racial conflict seems to approach a consensual goal.

and still simmers today, yet the ideas emerging from that debate are again too imprecise to derive clear observable implications on a geographical level. Thus I have found neither debate adequate, without adaptation, for analyzing the politics of white backlash—a complaint I share with others (e.g., Branton and Jones 1999, 5-7).

I end the chapter by distilling from these debates a series of approaches to racial polarization, each formulated within the terms of the framework introduced in the previous chapter. They are therefore theoretically distinct enough to permit falsification within geographical data. The extent to which these approaches conform to previous narratives is an open question, requiring an exegesis of the complicated stories told in each body of work. Thus, while I will try to draw parallels or underscore differences between each approach and the extant literature, my goal is not to set up tests that will allow blanket judgments of other research. Rather, the approach to contemporary racial polarization that I favor draws heavily from competing perspectives in the literature, and therefore represents more an attempt at reconciliation than at adjudication.

### *The Contact Hypothesis*

Supreme Court Justice Henry Billings Brown, who wrote the infamous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision permitting “separate but equal” accommodations for blacks, did not defend segregation using an explicitly racist appeal. Rather, he based the constitutional permissibility of *de jure* segregation upon a fatalistic view of what mere laws could accomplish. “If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other’s merits and a voluntary consent of individuals,” Brown wrote, “Legislation is powerless to erase racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences.”<sup>2</sup>

After World War II, a large number of social scientists set out to prove this claim wrong, at least

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<sup>2</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

as regards race relations. Ignorance creates fear and hatred, they reasoned. It allows rumor and innuendo to build. They had witnessed this phenomenon repeatedly during the war years. For example, Americans had held dehumanizing stereotypes of the Japanese (cited in Terkel 1984, 521):

You must realize we were not a worldly people. We were an isolated big country. We didn't know much about the Japanese and Japanese culture. They were yellow, they had squinty eyes, and they all looked evil. They were always evil in the movies, characters slinking around knifing people. You begin to think of them not as human beings but as little yellow things to be eradicated.

This disregard ultimately led to the evacuation of almost 120,000 people from a West Coast military command zone in Pearl Harbor's wake (Smith 1995, 161-62), and may have helped encourage the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan.

The best way to combat ignorance is with education, many reasoned, and the best way to learn someone's ways is to live near them. The logic carried over to domestic race relations quite easily. Forcing whites and blacks together, by integrating public housing or residential developments, presumably would produce better social relations. Allport (1979, chap. 16) popularized the idea. "The more one knows about a person the less likely he is to feel hostility toward him," he writes (1979, 226), "Those who know more about other races and people tend to have favorable attitudes toward them." Allport (1979, 226) recognizes that contact sometimes spurs mutual antagonism, but ultimately endorses the optimistic view of contact:

All in all, it seems safe to conclude that when barriers to communication are insurmountable, ignorance tends to make a person an easy prey to rumor, suspicions, and stereotype. This is most likely to occur, of course, if the unknown is also regarded as a potential threat.

Such a powerful statement of the opinion, in such a prominent book, spawned widespread research efforts on the "effect of contact"—especially because the idea justified government action of a sort embraced by many social scientists. The contact hypothesis appeared prominently, for example, in the arguments leading up to 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Miller and Brewer 1984b, 3).

The contact hypothesis literature is far too vast to summarize here. Social psychologists probed the idea from numerous angles, using widely varying sorts of data, including studies of public institutions, construction of laboratory experiments, and analysis of survey data. Public-housing projects were particularly popular, because administrators could experiment with different living arrangements. Researchers generally found that whites in mixed-race settlements reported relatively tolerant racial views, especially if whites and blacks shared the same public space (Deutsch and Collins 1951; Jahoda and West 1951, 137-38).

One of the most interesting experiments, frequently cited in the race relations literature, appears in a delightful book by Sherif and Sherif (1953). Muzafer Sherif gathered fairly similar children to a summer camp, divided them into groups, and then set about creating opportunities for the two groups to develop mutual hostility. Once the two groups took on distinct personalities, with negative stereotypes about each other, contact between them encouraging mutual participation quickly broke down the barriers again (Sherif and Sherif 1953, 222).

The “contact hypothesis” quickly ran into trouble, though, because hostility requires contact just as much as friendship does (Stone 1985, 89). Researchers soon began providing evidence against it as often as for it. Killian (1953, 69), for example, shows that Southern whites living in close proximity with African Americans almost uniformly found ways to avoid contact with blacks elsewhere. Glock et al. (1975, 106) looked at variation in anti-Semitism across Northern cities, expecting that the sentiment would thrive where intergroup contact was less frequent, but were forced to conclude just the opposite. Hallinan (1982, 66) evaluated classroom interracial friendships, and found that whites were most open to accepting blacks where white numerical superiority was unchallenged. It was precisely in mixed-race classrooms where social segregation was the greatest.

Jackman and Crane (1986) offer one of the most damning critiques of the contact hypothesis. They analyze 1975 Survey Research Center data documenting cross-racial friendship patterns, to see

whether such friendships influence racial views. Their findings underscore exactly the point I made earlier: that attitudes and political action are distinct. Whites with interracial friendships were significantly more tolerant in their racial views, but primarily as applied to “affect” for African Americans. Negative beliefs about the group as a whole appeared more resistant to reversal, and racial policy attitudes remained almost untouched (Jackman and Crane 1986, 471). Stereotypes may be correctable with better information, but desire for status advantages is not. Whites, they conclude (1986, 482), “are driven by an enduring force that is unaltered by a change in personal contact with blacks—the material and cultural interests of white racial privilege.”

Social psychologists tried to regroup in a 1984 volume edited by Norman Miller and Marilyn Brewer (1984a). In that book, the editors acknowledged the limited benefits of intergroup contact, but tried to maintain the theory by formalizing the conditions under which it would work (Miller and Brewer 1984b, 2):

1. Circumstances must allow groups equal status
2. The disliked group must not correspond to stereotypes
3. Mutually interdependent relations must be required by the contact situation
4. The contact must reveal enough detail to show individuality, and
5. Social norms of the contact situation must encourage equality

No doubt this more complex formulation properly qualifies the condition under which intergroup contact leads to greater tolerance. The specifications are rather demanding, however—possibly a feasible goal for social engineering in a single institution, but out of reach for an entire society. If all these conditions were met, the society would not experience racial problems in the first place!

Nor is it clear how this individual-level hypothesis should play out politically, or what observable implications it implies. The few explicit tests (e.g., Carsey 1995) have been rather limited, merely observing whether whites who live near a minority are more racially liberal than those who are more isolated. Given that people self-select where to live, no definitive conclusion seems possible. Such whites might be more tolerant because of the contact, or because of differences between them and the

whites who wind up in segregated neighborhoods. Tests have not captured the less parsimonious version.

The eventual watering down of the contact hypothesis parallels what I've described for its implicit opposite, the white-backlash hypothesis. That idea also apparently works only under certain rather specific conditions, for example in the South (Giles 1977; Jibou and Marshall 1974), for low-income voters (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Rogin 1969), in rural areas (Berard 1998; Voss 1996a), or among those with low efficacy (Giles and Evans 1985). The combined effect of qualifications on each side has moved the two competing ideas much closer to each other, greatly complicating any attempt to test for each. My overall impression is that no synthesis of the two ideas would give much guidance for the present research, other than a distinct conviction that when two socially defined races come together *something* is likely to happen. That will not take me very far.

### *Symbolic Racism vs. Group Threat*

Old-fashioned racism has declined almost steadily since World War II, although at different rates among different sorts of people. Most commentators attribute this welcome development to governmental intervention, in the form of civil-rights laws, and therefore see it as a vindication of "legislating morality." Less consensual is why whites still resist policies intended to equalize the aggregate quality of life enjoyed by different races (Schuman, Steeh and Bobo 1985). The main contenders in this debate are:

- **Ideological Racial Conservatism:** those who think racism has fragmented into a detached series of attitudes about racial issues, only some of which build on antipathy (e.g., Carmines 1996; Sniderman 1996; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sniderman et al. 1991; Sniderman, Brody and Kuklinski 1984; Sniderman with Hagen 1985);
- **Symbolic Racism:** those who think racism has gone underground, but still lurks within a body

of racially coded symbols perpetuated across generations of whites (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981; McConohay 1982; McConohay and Hough 1976; Miller and Sears 1986; Sears 1988; Sears and Allen 1984; Sears and Kinder 1971; Sears et al. 1980; Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979); and

- **Perceived Group Threat:** those who think whites gave up defending segregation but still fight other perceived assaults on their racial privileges (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1983, 1988, 1997; Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Pettigrew 1985).

The battle among these various perspectives has raged now for at least two decades, occasionally slipping into a stridency that is difficult for the outside reader to understand.

One would think that, with all of the scholarly output dedicated to the debate, it would be easy to extract observable implications from these theories allowing their falsification in aggregate data. In fact, I have found the debate almost completely unhelpful, with recent attempts at clarification no more useful than the original statements (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996, 291-94; Pettigrew 1985). Part of the problem is that, having emerged from empirical rather than theoretical research, these ideas are more operational than analytical. The reader is mostly left to guess what each theory implies from how it is captured in a quantitative model, and there's no guarantee that the models are analytically distinct. I am not the only outside observer frustrated or confused by the indeterminacy (Berard 1998, 4; Pettigrew 1985, 339).

The Sniderman work on Ideological Racial Conservatism is relatively clear, despite varying drastically in tone depending upon the co-author. Sniderman reports that racial attitudes no longer represent an underlying political orientation. Whites evaluate racial policies differently depending upon the particular facet of ideology that each evokes, only one of which is racism. Whereas opposition for some policies might hinge on one's level of individualism, others could depend upon moral traditionalism or simple affect toward blacks.

One enlightening set of experiments varied the traits of policy recipients. Did whites vary their support depending upon the race of who would benefit? It turns out that some whites, especially political conservatives, do not evaluate programs differently depending upon the beneficiary's race—yet are uncomfortable with social programs regardless of who benefits (Sniderman and Piazza 1993, 73). Carmines (1996) similarly reports that racial policy preferences are principled, pointing out that openly prejudicial liberals are more likely to *support* liberal racial policies than are unprejudiced conservatives. Gilliam (1996, 13-14), meanwhile, finds that conservatives are less influenced by the race of a criminal than are liberals. The combined results suggest that ideology matters.

The only limitation of the Sniderman *oeuvre*, for my usage, is its heavily attitudinal orientation. It does not address the question of where one would expect racial conservatism to thrive—a constraint imposed by all three approaches, ultimately—or why the ideologies that lead to modern racial conservatism spring up. This is not a strong criticism; there's no reason the research necessarily carries such obligations. But the theoretical work, while solid, simply does not permit formulation of clear geographical implications.<sup>3</sup>

The “symbolic racism” literature is perhaps the most voluminous, and the hardest to pin down. Even the name is confusing, as both proponents and opponents readily concede.<sup>4</sup> Advocates accept that old-fashioned racism has declined. Whites seldom admit believing that African Americans are biologically inferior, or that their political rights should be abridged. However, a new form of racism has risen in its place, one that attributes black social problems to cultural and moral deficiencies. Anti-black emotions hide behind symbols and code words, allowing whites to communicate their racism

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one could imagine a case that Sniderman's theory and evidence are simply a phenomenologically incomplete rendition of either the symbolic racism or group threat approach. Kinder and Sanders (1996, 292-93) seem to imply as much.

<sup>4</sup> Bobo (1983) wants to rename the idea “sophisticated prejudice,” a decent choice, although one might question the level of sophistication required. Kinder and Sanders (1996, 293) prefer the “racial resentment” approach, which strikes me as no better than the original, since it captures neither the socialization nor the lack of self interest implicated by their narrative.

politely without violating contemporary norms. Indeed, by couching black failures within this symbolic vocabulary, racist whites are able to invoke long-standing American mores against their target. The resentment has no foundation in rational self-interest, however. Symbolic racists oppose government policies on behalf of racial minorities, seeing group claimants as unworthy, because of resentment passed down to successive generations through political socialization.

Critics have found much to dislike about this approach, so much that I will not review every quibble here. A few critiques are directly relevant, however. The first is that, aside from the subtle manner of communication, it's not clear how this "new" form of racism is distinct from traditional racism. Certainly old-fashioned racists traded in "symbols," passed down a legacy of hate to their offspring, engaged in behavior inexplicable from a perspective of short-term rationality, and resented government efforts on behalf of African Americans. That they tended to use rhetoric based upon biological rather than cultural inferiority is a rather thin dividing line, with no obvious operational implications.<sup>5</sup>

A second problem is that the symbolic racism writings conflate into one narrative a handful of conceptually distinct variables. Racial attitudes may or may not pass across generations. Racism may trade in biological rhetoric, cultural rhetoric, or naked thuggery. Racial policy preferences may emerge from rational calculation, or they may emerge from irrational impulses based upon ignorance. Opposition to racially progressive policies may reveal themselves psychologically as resentment, or they may appear as cold attachment to principle. Each of these variables is a valid object of study, but there's no reason why they must fit into one comprehensive phenomenon. Evidence in favor of one claim, for example the inculcation of racial attitudes during pre-adolescent development, does little to

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<sup>5</sup> A claim of *cultural* inferiority may seem to allow exceptions more easily, since someone cannot escape genetics as easily as they can don white cultural habits. Yet practitioners of even the most virulent forms of *biological* racism have managed to allow exceptions when convenient. Particularly valuable Jewish intellectuals were "honorary Aryan" status in Nazi Germany, of all places, and the distinction between "good blacks" and "bad niggers" long predates the decline of biological racism.

promote the remaining package. So it is well-nigh impossible to test the fractured symbolic racism narrative in any one research project.

A final criticism is that the symbolic racism literature uses variables to measure the concept that are in no way analytically distinct from other approaches. It sometimes features survey questions to represent symbolic racism that other researchers (e.g., McConohay, Hardee and Bates 1981) use to represent conventional racism (c.f., Pettigrew 1985, 339), and others that directly elicit the respondent's sense whether black advances are threatening to their primary reference group (Bobo 1983, 1,197). Much of the complexity underlying racial policy preferences gets stripped out in the analysis (Bobo and Kluegel 1993, 460; Sniderman and Tetlock 1986a, 1986b). The "right" side in racial policy debates is not hard to identify, since some writings treat opposition to affirmative action or economic assistance to blacks as itself an indicator of racism (Kinder and Sears 1981). Other writings shade even closer to implying that political conservatism is part of what defines the racist package (Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979). "Conceptual vagueness leads to empirical confusion," Thomas Pettigrew (1985, 339) writes, summarizing this criticism. "Both conceptually and empirically, then, a close reading reveals considerable overlap between symbolic racism and both traditional racism and political conservatism."

Most applications of the "group threat" approach are equivalently clouded, although criticism has not been articulated as widely. Threat research reports that whites oppose racial policies because they see black advancement as a threat to their reference group. They may think that the civil-rights movement has moved too quickly (Bobo 1983, 1,204), or they may place great stock in their "whiteness" (Giles and Evans 1986, 471-72). This work does not necessarily claim that blacks are an objective threat, however, and certainly does not require that whites have an accurate perspective about the costs of particular policies. It essentially begs the question of where "perceived threat" or "group attachment" originates, or when it will spread (Bobo 1983, 1,200). If these perceptions have

no basis in objective competition, then Sears, Hensler and Speer (1979, 369) must be correct that the concept of self-interest has been “stretched so far as to be meaningless.” All we end up knowing is that the same people both consider blacks threatening and oppose policies to help them. It would be a strange person indeed who regularly endorsed giving resources to a perceived enemy! It is the perception, then, that would seem to require explaining.

In sum, the raging debate over white racial conservatism has generated lots of heat but little light, at least from the perspective of this research. No clear observable implications applicable to political geography emerge from the vast literature, because research operates almost entirely at a psychological level, connecting attitudes to opinions and opinions to preferences. No comprehensive framework for understanding racial conservatism yet exists.

### **Competing Narratives: A Finalized Framework**

In the last chapter, I proposed that racial competition could revolve around four different motives: political, economic, cultural and psychological. This categorization, although parsimonious, is still more complicated than the undifferentiated “threat” that supposedly derives from proximity between two ethnic groups. My review of Southern history suggests that these motives shift in prominence over time, and in particular proposes that contemporary racial tensions have shifted from the political sphere to the cultural and (to a lesser extent) economic spheres. The task becomes even more complex, however, when transforming general concepts into specific observable implications. Social science theories are not so specific that they preclude multiple representations.

Take the case of “symbolic racism.” As discussed in the last section, some scholars consider modern racism to be based on resentment, especially of blacks who violate conventional values and yet demand assistance from American institutions (or so the perception runs). The idea is too influential for me to exclude as an explanation of contemporary racial politics, yet it carries no obvious

geographical significance. A naive interpretation might stress the irrational and symbolic nature of racial hostility, and therefore suppose that racial conservatism should not follow any geographical pattern at all.<sup>6</sup> This would not be an unfair interpretation, since advocates often build their symbol-oriented interpretation on the lack of any such pattern (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996, chap. 4). On the other hand, one might emphasize the cross-generational origin of these symbols, and therefore suppose that racial conservatism would follow whatever pattern it followed during the previous generation. Aside from the stickiness in attitudes over time, proximity would correlate with greater racial conservatism, but primarily in locales with little population turnover. Or one might concentrate on the value-based nature of symbolic racism, and suppose that racial conservatism would thrive where traditional norms are strongest. Because work on symbolic racism is more a narrative than an hypothesis, the idea is simply too imprecise for translation into a single, testable proposition. The same might be said of its closest competitor, the group threat approach, since the “threat” whites perceive may or may not have a basis in reality.

Rather than try to falsify previous narratives, turning them into hypotheses out of whole cloth, I am forced to mix and match the scraps until they form unique hypotheses with unique observable implications. My solution is to distill from the vast literature on racial conflict the most important distinctions that any set of categories must preserve, drawing in particular from two primary sources: Giles and Evans (1985, 1986) and Blalock (1967, chap. 5).

The proximity effect, in all its forms, represents a white response to the community racial mix. As the black population rises, whites purportedly exhibit increasing racial sensitivity. Yet this “hypothesis” begs a crucial question: Which community? Varied forms of competition will be bounded within different community borders. Some conflict is inherently local: the battle over residential aesthetics, over ethnic flavor, over a particular playground or popular hangout. Naturally these local

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<sup>6</sup> Berard (1998) operationalizes the theory in this way.

clashes will draw their form in part from American society's broader racial divide. But the stakes usually are focused, so susceptibility should be too. At the opposite extreme, seeking a friendly presidential administration is partly a national conflict. The costs of particular programs might hit some whites harder than others, and therefore produce geographical patterns of racial polarization. But influence over entitlement programs and institutional procedures spreads the stakes widely among whites as a caste, as widely as any competition can.

Furthermore, the nature of a conflict shapes its borders. Granted, the boycott of a particular neighborhood store can spread to engulf a whole city, or even the entire country, because it holds symbolic value. But usually the consequences of racial conflict suggest natural bounds. Economic competition does not conform to the same geography as political conflict. Neither overlap with the "culture wars." They will hit some communities hardest, and pass others by. It is precisely this mutability of racial conflict that I intend to exploit. Because different forms of racial conflict imply different patterns of racial polarization—that is, because they produce distinct observable implications—they are accessible to empirical testing.

This section lays out seven distinct approaches to modern-day racial polarization, derived from the substantive work in the last three chapters but now tied more directly to observable implications as they would appear in geographical data. Four derive from the "white backlash" logic, but differentiate the proximity effect according to whether racial polarization hinges on political, economic or cultural stakes. The others operate at a psychological level, and are guided by a view of racial conflict as fundamentally irrational (i.e., built on ignorance and irrationality rather than genuine group conflict). In each case, I follow the argument with my best-shot attempt to translate the idea into testable hypotheses. For the time being these hypotheses only appear in general form, rather than in terms of any specific data set. I leave it to the subsequent empirical chapters to translate hypothesized patterns into specifics, as the data in each chapter permit.

- **Naive Symbolic Politics Approach**—Racial conservatism does not grow from objective conditions, but from stereotypes and symbols picked up during childhood. Some whites see African Americans as a threat, while others do not, and individual perspectives scatter haphazardly across the population because they have no rational basis. Racial polarization thus should not follow any meaningful geographic pattern, with relation to black proximity, at any level of aggregation (Berard 1998).
- **Contact Hypothesis**—If racial conservatism is fundamentally irrational, then it must stem from ignorance and unchecked prejudice. Stereotypes cannot persist where African Americans are present in sufficient numbers that regular social interaction will educate whites. Proximity thus would lessen racial conservatism as reality imposes itself, shattering prejudices (Carsey 1995). In keeping with refined versions of the concept, we might expect proximity will do the most good where conditions are more equal between two groups (Miller and Brewer 1984b, 2). This interactive pattern would obtain at the neighborhood or precinct level, but should taper off as the unit of aggregation grows such that whites could avoid interracial contact no matter the density. Also, proximity would only be beneficial if the black population has been in place for some length of time; new arrivals have not enjoyed sufficient contact to overturn stereotypes and may even excite white fears (Wong and Strolovitch 1996).
- **Migration Hypothesis**—Even if racial conservatism grows out of childhood socialization, rather than any genuine contextual influence or competitive threat, this perspective will shape individual decisions later in life. In particular, racially prejudiced individuals will gravitate toward communities where their disliked group is in short supply, whereas those for whom race is less salient will pick communities based upon other criteria. The end result of this process would be similar to the contact hypothesis, in cross-sectional data: proximity will appear to produce lower racial conservatism. However, the result should be strongest where *more* whites are migrants,

and presumably were sorting themselves out, not where the population is most stable.

- **Traditional White Backlash Hypothesis (Politics)**—Racial conservatism represents an effort by whites to maintain political control as an empowered majority (Key 1949). Polarization will surge as the African-American population increases in density, with an exceptionally large expression of racial conservatism where blacks approach the point of deciding local elections. This pattern would be weaker at the neighborhood or precinct level, because those areal units are not politically relevant. Whites within a racially mixed precinct have no greater political incentive to coalesce against black neighbors when voting for Congress than those in an all-white precinct, if both appear in the same congressional district. Meaningful effects would result from the racial balance within politically relevant borders: counties, legislative districts, states.
- **White Colonizer Backlash Hypothesis (Economic)**—Whites enjoy the fruits of anti-black economic discrimination when surrounded by a large, marginalized African-American population (Glenn 1963). They are able to construct a split labor market, and profit therefrom (Bonacich 1972, 1976). Proximity thus leads to greater racial conservatism. However, in locales where white and black resources become more similar, the labor market is undifferentiated, so whites face little incentive to engage in race-based collective action. Proximity will not matter when conditions are relatively equal.
- **Hard Times Backlash Hypothesis (Economic)**—A retrenchment against civil-rights gains set in when national finances turned sour around 1968. Americans were happy to see racial progress while the economy was booming, but once job competition became a zero-sum game then repairing statistical disparities among racial groups required sacrificing particular whites. Lean prospects encourage whites to defend historical group privileges, especially when racial advantage would give them leverage against nearby blacks. Poor and uneducated individuals, meanwhile, may compensate for material sacrifices by stressing status advantages attached to

their group membership (Bettelheim and Janowitz 1964). Proximity thus leads to greater racial conservatism, the more so as economic conditions tighten (e.g., higher unemployment, lower income) or likelihood of a job threat becomes more severe (e.g., white and black socioeconomic resources become more similar).<sup>7</sup>

- **Symbolic White Backlash Hypothesis (Cultural)**—Whites struggle with the African-American population to define the nation's social and political discourse. They fight to preserve a "way of life" that appears threatened (Wong and Strolovitch 1996). They also struggle to determine the value of "cultural capital," or the social value placed on traits that vary across ethnic groups and across geographical locales (Merelman 1994, 3-4). Cultural struggle may revolve around what many commentators call "institutional racism," or facially race-neutral cultural judgments that nevertheless are unnecessary and have a racially disparate impact. Contrary to the "Symbolic Racism" approach, this perspective stresses that struggle over social values represents a genuine power threat, one that does not strike all whites similarly.

Proximity may produce greater racial conservatism in small-town or rural America, because it forces whites to struggle with a black population to define local social institutions. This is especially true because rural areas tend to resist change, and therefore will have preserved historical proximity patterns that municipalities have cast off (Ford 1960; Orum and McCranie 1970, 170). The proximity effect will decline or even reverse in more urban locales, though, because whites there vary significantly in their attachment to "white middle-class norms."<sup>8</sup> Those who are more (sub)urbanized will have the most to lose precisely when they reside in white

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<sup>7</sup> The Authoritarian Personality appears most commonly among lower-status whites, and therefore when applied to geographical data is simply an alternate description of this same argument. Lower-status whites are supposed to prefer order and a simplified world because of their marginal status, and one appealing way to achieve these psychological benefits is by categorizing people racially. The end result is the same: material deprivation makes racial conservatism more appealing.

<sup>8</sup> These norms should not be mistaken for a real class-based identity. Most Americans consider themselves "middle class," so these values are primarily an associational or ideological quality.

enclaves, where these norms are prevalent and the cultural advantages strongest.<sup>9</sup>

The level of aggregation is particularly important for this approach. At low levels, the backlash pattern would be reversed if anything, because racially mixed neighborhoods allow real cultural assimilation (i.e., not just tolerance, but a real convergence of interests). Few whites in heavily black neighborhoods have much vested in the “white middle class” subculture, whereas they have a lot of interest in keeping the peace or in policies to improve their mutual locality. At larger geographical levels, such as counties or especially states, the pattern may gravitate toward a typical backlash finding, since there’s no guarantee of assimilation within large areas, and these units would include both white enclaves and distant blacks whom they might perceive to threaten their values or privileges. I test this idea, which might be called the Assimilation Corollary, explicitly in Chapter 8. In that county-level analysis, I allow for the possibility that whites react not against blacks under conditions of familiarity, but against blacks who are merely *nearby* but likely still strangers, who are “close but not touching.”

## **Conclusion**

I began this chapter by evaluating two debates in social psychology, one over the “contact hypothesis,” and one over “symbolic racism.” These exchanges each enjoyed greater attention than the backlash literature, and appeared in the most prominent social-science publications. Therefore, they would seem the logical launching point for any treatment of racial conflict. However, I probed those debates here enough to show that they offer limited assistance. Neither their agreements nor their disagreements are clear enough to produce spatial implications. If the discipline is to begin a renewed

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<sup>9</sup> Wong and Strolovitch (1996) assume that conflict over “way of life” is intimately linked to “a struggle for territory and the privilege associated with it.” With New York hate crimes, their supposition apparently proves correct. This is not necessarily surprising, though, because hate crimes require not just the racial hostility but also the victim, which is why lynching studies have struggled to capture the probability of two races running into each other (Reed 1972). The territorial link need not apply to all forms of cultural backlash, so I do not incorporate it here.

exploration of political geography, using methodological tools available for the first time, then a more distinctive set of hypotheses is necessary for that analysis. This chapter offered a humble first step in that direction.

The “approaches” presented here (summarized in Table 5-1) finalize the framework introduced in the last chapter by adding the geographical ingredient. It first categorizes possible explanations for racial conservatism into two camps: those based upon self-interested competition, and those based upon psychological motives. I further divided the psychological approach according to its possible implications over time, and the materialist approach according to the spoils over which two ethnic groups might battle. I ended by tracing the various materialist and psychological approaches to observable implications for which one could test empirically. The implications are unique for each approach because they take into account how a proximity effect would vary from one sort of community to another, as well as across one set of indicator to another.

Obviously I've had to make some judgment calls in this analysis; translating complex, specific processes into discrete, abstract concepts will never be so clean as to satisfy everyone. Yet my attempt has managed to incorporate, into a systematic framework, ideas that percolate throughout the multi-disciplinary study of racial politics. I've used it to construct hypotheses specific to the contemporary United States, but the distinctions that provide a foundation for the model are perfectly adaptable to other settings. The remainder of this manuscript uses a few particularly valuable sources of data to show how research can build on the framework incrementally, compensating for the weakness of any one empirical analysis by triangulating on these distinct operational hypotheses.

**Table 5-1: The Observable Implications of Proximity Effects**

	<i>Motive for Polarization</i>	<i>Hypothesis Number</i>	<i>Proximity Argument</i>	<i>Interactive Term</i>	<i>Direction of Relationship when interaction is:</i>	
					<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<b>Psychological</b>		<b>1</b>	Naive Symbolic Politics Approach	None	none	
		<b>2</b>	Contact Hypothesis	Status Difference	Negative	none
				Population Instability	Negative	none
	<b>3</b>	Migration Hypothesis	Population Instability	none	Negative	
<b>Rational</b>	Political	<b>4</b>	Traditional Backlash	None	Positive	
	Economic	<b>5</b>	Colonizer Backlash	Status Difference	none	Positive
	Economic	<b>6</b>	Hard Times Backlash	Status Difference	Positive	none
				Status	Positive	none
Cultural	<b>7</b>	Symbolic or Cultural Backlash	Urbanization	Positive	Negative	
			Professionalization	Positive	Negative	

Note: "Direction of Relationship" indicates whether proximity causes two races to become less polarized (i.e., Negative), more polarized (i.e., Positive), or should have no real effect (i.e., none). "Interactive Term" indicates the variable multiplied by black density to test the hypothesis. For example, the Contact Hypothesis suggests that interracial contact will lessen racial polarization or conservatism, but primarily when two ethnic groups approach equal status or the population is more stable.

## PART II

### Close, But Not Touching

*Luxury, then, is a way of  
being ignorant, comfortably*

Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Political Poem" (1964)