

***RACIAL PROPOSITIONS:***  
*Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California*

DANIEL MARTINEZ HO SANG

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REVIEW ESSAY BY ETHAN J. LEIB\*

There are obviously many ways to write a history of the American struggle toward racial equality after World War II. Our battle against the Nazis and their most malignant form of racism set the stage for much that followed in the history of race relations in the U.S. Professor HoSang’s innovative approach in writing this history in *Racial Propositions* is not to focus on the U.S. experience at large — but to focus on its most populous state: California. More innovative still, HoSang tries to understand political developments about race in the postwar period through the processes of direct democracy in California, where the people of the state get to issue relatively unmediated expressions of their preferences and affinities. What he is able to reveal is that the presumed bastion of progressivism hasn’t been especially impressive at addressing racism in its territory; no longer can we only think of the South as racially retrograde in the postwar period. California often gets associated with a certain kind of liberalism (though it isn’t nearly as univocally “Blue”

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in the postwar period as some might assume) — but Professor HoSang helpfully reminds us that California's direct democracy is a forum in which that liberalism facilitates racialized ballot measures that often hinder racial integration in the state. The measures and the campaigns surrounding them, HoSang argues, help redefine race and racial equality in the process.

Although his method can have limitations — the story of race in California cannot really be fully isolated from the nation's as a whole, and the politics of race in the state surely cannot be limited to direct democracy when so much else happens in legislatures, courts, and executive offices — HoSang reasonably tries to narrow his scope and pick a lens into this otherwise dauntingly large subject area. His methodological choices are always fully transparent and, ultimately, the historical narrative he tells in his book is a truly engaging, well-written, and provocative account of how certain liberal theories of racial equality produce an arsenal of arguments for the opponents of many efforts at achieving racial justice. Moreover, HoSang charts how reigning theories of racial equality actually can hamstring civil rights activists in how they make their cases in the courts of public opinion and elsewhere. In a way, the consensus commitment to racial equality can serve to limit what the champions of racial justice can realistically say and accomplish. This is a subtle and often underappreciated way to think about racial politics and how they play out before the electorate.

The book is organized as a set of careful case studies about how certain propositions got onto the ballot in California, how certain propositions failed to qualify, how certain propositions were defeated, and how certain propositions succeeded. The aim in each chapter is to focus on the rhetorical campaigns opponents and proponents waged, with the purpose of revealing which accounts of racial equality proved themselves to have swayed the populace. There are chapters on the failed Prop. 11 in 1946, which would have created a Fair Employment Practices Commission (chapter 2); the successful Prop. 14 in 1964, which exempted many real estate transactions from fair housing legislation (chapter 3); the successful Prop. 21 in 1972 and Prop. 1 in 1979, which took aim at mandatory desegregation orders in California school districts (chapter

4); the successful Prop. 38 in 1984 and Prop. 63 in 1986, which reinforced California's commitment to English as an official language (chapter 5); the successful Prop. 187 in 1994, which rendered undocumented immigrants unable to receive social services, public health benefits, and public education (chapter 6); the successful Prop. 209 in 1996 and Prop. 227 in 1998, which ended public affirmative action and ended most public bilingual education, respectively (chapter 7); and the failed Prop. 54 in 2003, which would have banned race data collection and analysis by the government (chapter 8).

In each chapter, HoSang plausibly shows how a certain account of colorblindness as the goal of a progressive society enables opponents of racial progress to wrap themselves comfortably within a rhetoric of antiracism. He refers to the dominant mode of rhetoric as "racial liberalism": he thinks of it as an ideology that supports purging society of direct racial prejudice and that promotes fairness, tolerance, individual rights, and equality before the law. Blatant racism is mostly gone in the campaigns HoSang scrutinizes, save for some of the funders of the campaigns — and when those funders come to light, the relevant campaigns can falter quickly unless the more public advocates distance themselves from racism and extremism. But the campaigns show how one can embrace a story of racial equality that facilitates a covering over of systematic and structural effects of racism, past and ongoing. This is different from the conventional story about how direct democracy gives voters the ability to express their deep-seated prejudice through the private ballot; it highlights how the discourse power of racial equality itself enables certain results that sit in some tension with a more thoroughgoing commitment to system-wide and structural racial justice.

Although each chapter is an exhaustively researched and fair-minded account of the proposition battles under the microscope, there is always room to quibble. In the opening chapter on Prop. 11 (and one might question the strategy of starting with a failed ballot measure, since failed ballot measures are the norm, not exceptional at all), readers will wonder why more attention isn't paid to anti-communism and anti-bureaucratic sentiment as factors that were probably at least as potent in leading California voters to reject bureaucratic oversight over antidiscrimination in

the workplace. The measure was clearly supported by members of the Communist Party, and backlash to administrative overreaching after the New Deal was prevalent in the state. Accordingly, the failure of Prop. 11 is not easily attributable to a discourse of racial equality that was turned in on itself. To be fair, HoSang tries to acknowledge multiple causes and explanations in each of his case studies, sometimes tying the individual campaigns at issue to larger political forces or other ballot battles during the relevant election. But his overarching agenda can sometimes suppress his willingness to pursue how these multiple causes complicate the story he wants to tell.

His account of Prop. 14, which focuses on the rise of the “homeownership” category as a political tool to stymie racial integration is fascinating and important. And it surely makes plain how certain valences of liberalism and colorblindness norms can be marshaled to cover over the link between whiteness and value — literal cash value of property. But the fact that the legislature passed the Rumford Act (which is what Prop. 14 sought to repeal) and that the courts undid Prop. 14 quickly are merely incidental in HoSang’s narrative. That is curious if what you really want to tell is the complex story of the battle for racial equality in housing in California. Courts also quickly undid the anti-immigrant Prop. 187 and the anti-busing Prop. 21. Although Prop. 1 was more cleverly drafted to entrench a norm against mandatory desegregation orders (and so passed judicial muster), HoSang has some trouble with the undeniable fact that Chicanos, Blacks, and Asian-Americans had real and deep ambivalence about mandatory desegregation orders and busing. And Props 187, 209, and 227 had minority faces that were saliently attached to their sales pitches to the electorate. One could have reasonably wished for longer meditations on these complexities in the book, which are always acknowledged but also quickly brushed aside as epiphenomenal.

Ultimately, the bookends of the volume — the start and end of the monograph — are absolutely clear that this is history done with a larger purpose: to show how “racial liberalism” is a deeply limiting concept and is responsible in some part (or in large measure) for the success of conservative efforts to disrupt racial progress on many fronts. And the book has to be judged on whether it delivers on its promise there.

The argument is ambitious and sometimes quite persuasive. At its core, it is probably true that some thin versions of racial justice that focus principally on eradicating intentional discrimination and promoting a colorblind society can serve to undermine important policies that can be pursued in racial justice's name. Moreover, these "liberal" theories can have a constraining effect on the kinds of arguments the political vocabulary will deem admissible, tying the hands of progressives who want to explore more nuanced views about how racism ought to be combated. If this is what HoSang is out to prove, he does an admirable job in showing us this dynamic on the stage of direct democracy in California in the postwar period. It is an excellent application of Hartz into the intellectual history of race in America.

But there is every reason to think HoSang wants to say more than this, since this story is relatively familiar — and one most progressives have come to appreciate (even if progressives have had a great deal of trouble destabilizing the rhetorical power of this form of "racial liberalism"). If colorblindness is the mantra, you can easily lose the affirmative action debate. If your theory of racial justice focuses on some versions of individual and atomized equality, then power structures, historical patterns that have disparate impact on minority groups, and class-based subordination lose their pressing relevance. If racism is just psychological pathology as Gunnar Myrdal diagnosed it, the fight to remediate structural inequalities is rarely able to displace concerns about "reverse discrimination" against actually-existing individuals. Historians have been trying for some time to figure out *why* Myrdalian conceptions of racism have had so much staying power — and why more economic and class-based critiques of racial hierarchies have not been especially successful in postwar politics, whether in direct democracy or elsewhere. Some hypotheses include anti-communist sentiment, enthusiasm for localism, a wave of separatism among minority communities, and the failure of political institutions to be able to support and maintain interracial alliances, which might have contributed to unseating the Myrdalian picture. But here is perhaps where we might recruit HoSang to make an intervention: it is his view that the Myrdalian conception of racism

supports and underwrites what he calls “political whiteness,” which helps account for its ongoing success and power.

The centrality of “political whiteness” and its rootedness in racial liberalism as the primary explanation for California’s racialized proposition battles in the postwar period is HoSang’s most controversial claim; and it is one in which he has a substantial investment. Yet it leaves the reader wanting for two main reasons. In the first place, the theory is extremely difficult to falsify. Although “political whiteness” is an organizing principle of the book, its definition remains somewhat vague throughout. Here is how HoSang describes it in the Conclusion: “a formulation of political subjectivity, identity, and community in which whiteness functions as an absent referent within the putatively neutral and abstract terms of liberalism” (p. 266). But this is argument by fiat: it is pretty difficult to identify something that is by definition absent. Worse, it seems to disable one from ever making a good faith judgment that some approaches to racial justice are, in fact, inconsistent with a more basic commitment to liberalism (or some other supervening good). It seems hard to understand how one could have a principled opposition to a civil-rights-community preferred outcome in any policy space without being called “politically white.”

For example, the debate about affirmative action can’t really be summarized adequately in an intellectually serious way as between the real champions of racial progress on the side of affirmative action and the “politically white” who oppose it. It must be possible to disagree on the merits of what racial justice requires on many questions without having to take on the moniker of “whiteness” for disagreeing with civil rights community orthodoxy. Since “political whiteness” is by definition an “absent referent,” it seems very difficult to see how white people could ever cleanse themselves of such a charge. Nonwhites in the book who agree with the “politically white” position are almost always given the benefit of the doubt (as misguided but in good faith), while most whites who oppose the civil rights community are essentially accused of false consciousness of a sort. That doesn’t seem quite plausible, even if it is likely that many oppositional whites do engage in false consciousness on a range of issues. Is it really false consciousness (or “whiteness”) to care

about colorblindness as an ideal and resist affirmative action accordingly? Sometimes, and sometimes not. Is it really false consciousness to care about your home's property value and to ignore or to subordinate the racially segregating effects of your policy choice to protect your home's value? Sometimes, and sometimes not. Is it false consciousness to want to reserve state resources for legal residents in a time of fiscal austerity, even if such a policy has undeniable racialized and nativist implications? For some, and not others, I suspect. It seems more confounding than clarifying to lump all the complexity in these policy debates into mere vehicles of "political whiteness."

There is a related problem for HoSang in operationalizing "political whiteness" as a frame of analysis. He doesn't embrace a conventional "median voter" or "pivotal voter" theory, which would instruct us to investigate the group of voters at decisional threshold who are actually necessary to a direct democracy result and assess how their decisions get made. By narrowing the inquiry this way, it might at least be possible to disentangle those who have good faith views from those whose views are driven by what HoSang is calling "political whiteness." But HoSang doesn't commit to how many citizens in a given majority (a majority of the majority is another possible contender for operationalizing a falsifiability test) have to embrace the "absent referent" for the theory to be vindicated in any given proposition battle. It is, therefore, very hard to know how formidable a force "political whiteness" is and how we ought to think about how it does its work. Again, we can't really falsify the theory by any metric and that should give us pause.

It could be that this is getting too social sciency: HoSang's method is largely focused on a history of rhetoric — and the book doesn't need formalistic measures or coefficients to make its core point about the discourse power of racial liberalism. Racial liberalism contains the seeds of racial conservatism because its rhetoric is ultimately too anemic to attack very malignant forms of structural racism. To make this point, however, it is not at all clear that the framing of "political whiteness" is especially necessary or productive. This is the second reason that the main thrust of the book might disturb many readers. For a book so attuned to the discourse power of certain modes of argument

and branding associated with approaches to racial justice, *Racial Propositions* veers into a kind of rhetoric that is unlikely to work to destabilize the norms that racial liberalism has been complicit in supporting. To be sure, reifying “whiteness,” focusing on “apartheid” in California, attacking narratives of “racial innocence,” and elaborating on “Blue State Racism” — all of which are invoked somewhat promiscuously in the volume — all speak to important truths. And racial progressives (whom I suppose we can contrast with HoSang’s nomenclature of racial liberals) surely have reasons to doubt that their rhetorical strategies focusing on anti-subordination, structural racism, reparation, and the incidents of economic structure with racialized effects can be successful and convincing in today’s political climate.

Yet the book leaves the reader with no doubt that much of racial progressives’ failures over the decades in postwar California had as much to do with messaging as message. With cross-cutting interests and internal feuding (and without full support from the Democratic Party), the opposition groups to Props. 187 and 209, for example, played their cards quite badly. One watches the civil rights community bungle proposition battle after proposition battle, leaving those of us sympathetic to progressive politics wondering why progressives can’t hire better consultants and design better campaigns that resonate with the populace. HoSang’s “political whiteness” argument is one explanation since there may be no argument that can resonate with those in thrall to political whiteness — but something less sinister might be as much to blame: bad organizing, bad branding, bad centralizing, and bad discipline in keeping interest groups focused and united. When the civil rights community runs a competent campaign with a master tactician like David Axelrod at the helm and the deep pockets of the Democratic Party funding the efforts, as it did against Ward Connerly’s Racial Privacy Initiative in Prop. 54, it can succeed — “Blue State racism,” notwithstanding. True enough, in the Prop. 54 battle, civil rights groups didn’t promote a deeper conversation about the dangers of racial liberalism and the need for a more structural approach to combating racism. Yet maybe that choice was not a succumbing to “political whiteness.” Rather, it might just have been good pragmatic politics, leaving the larger conversation about race for another day.

In the final analysis, when that larger conversation happens, I suspect that the progressive tradition and its rhetorical arsenal developed over the postwar decades remains the best hope for overcoming the dominant paradigm of racial liberalism in the long term. The rhetorical baggage of “political whiteness” that HoSang prefers, by contrast, will likely remain more alienating and balkanizing to the very large group of liberals he is surely hoping to influence with his rhetorical choices. Ultimately, though, I am no marketing expert. If large groups of people find HoSang’s book as stimulating and engaging as this reader did, he might be able to break the stasis of the racial *modus vivendi* in California.

It is probably the case that after Prop. 8 few people think of California as at the frontier of civil rights in this country. Professor HoSang helpfully reminds us that this is not news but a pattern. Whether he will succeed in changing that pattern in the direct democracy politics of the future is really the ultimate test of his theory’s power. And the jury is still out, of course. ★