Book examines race, comparative politics and democracy

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHELDER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

In 1873, Edward A. Freeman, a founder of comparative politics, proposed an analytical framework for the new field. A scientific method to study political phenomena, he suggested, should avoid excessive reliance on empirical details, spatial and temporal boundaries, and anecdotal evidence. Applied appropriately, comparative politics would demonstrate the commonalities and differences of common social systems.

Thirty-five years later, Freeman responded to research calling doubt on the common origins of people, nation-states and by revising his thesis. "The doctrine or race is an archaic doctrine," Freeman acknowledged.

Examining differences

This shift, Michael Hanchard, a professor of African Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, points out, allowed him to embrace race as a social fact, with significant political implications. And to continue to believe that the United States "would be a grand land if only every Ishmael would kill a Negro and be hanged for it!"

Ironically, Freeman was unique among practitioners of comparative politics (in his time and later), Hanchard argues, in setting forth a methodology to examine how ascribed racial differences "influence the development and maintenance of political institutions.”

Provocative and timely

In “The Spectre of Race,” a book intended for professors of political science and a broader audience, Hanchard maintains that exclusion, based on race, ethnicity and gender has been a defining feature of democracies from ancient Athens to modern-day Iran, Russia, France and the United States.


Principles and realities

Hanchard presents lots of evidence that the governments of Great Britain, France and the United States have for centuries "structured preferences and outcomes” based on racial and ethnic-national distinctions. He identifies tensions between “a state’s declaration of freedom to democratic principles” and “actual political realities.”

Branding dissent as a threat to social order, he writes, governments in these countries suppressed, violated, imprisoned, disenfranchised and attacked marginalized groups, at home and in their colonies.

The United States has had a more public conversation about issues in its society than England and France. It has added, however, that he is not suggesting that Americans have been more successful in combating institutional racism.

Studied as polyarchies

Racial hierarchy and repression, Hanchard maintains, does not disqualify these regimes as democracies. He believes, however, that they are best understood as polyarchies, with multiple modalities of governance and political rule, formal and informal, in which racial and ethnic divisions are rendered salient, “evidenced by institutional racism and discrimination,” and are protected from those who seek to replace them with more transparent, democratic, and egalitarian institutions.

Silent on commitments

Hanchard’s review of democracy’s dark history is compelling. Nonetheless, it seems to me, he does not demonstrate that racism is the defining characteristic of democracy.

“The Spectre of Race” is relatively silent on the commitments of political elites (many of them from dominant demographic groups) in England, France and the United States to inclusion, on policies, laws, and practices designed to make good on those commitments; and on the political and social realities of marginalized groups now hold.

The ideology of White nationalism may contain associations that can be traced back to Athens, but so many give marriage and the decision of the German government to take in one million immigrants.

Parading reminder

Robert Dahl, who formulated the concept of polyarchy, Hanchard reminds us, applied it to “relatively (incompletely) democratized regimes” that were “highly inclusive extensivily open to contestation.”

Deemed in this way, democracy may well be the least worst political system yet designed, and the most likely to extend full citizenship rights to previously excluded groups.

Dr. Glenn C. Altshuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Levitan Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

BOOK REVIEW