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Review of *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media,
and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, by Martin Gilens

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for colorblind policies and programs, “as the sentiment of racial anxieties has become even more silent” (p. 238).

Despite a few repetitious points in the book and places where I would have liked to have had the wealth of impressions and concerns expressed by officials in memos and policy documents corroborated and challenged by other related sources and nonwhite perspectives, these do little to overshadow Füredi’s accomplishment with this historical project on imperialism. It has much to offer postcolonial studies in the social sciences.

Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipov-erty Policy. By Martin Gilens. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. xii+296. \$25.00.

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This book’s title is surely a loaded question. Yet, that is Martin Gilens’s point: by the time Americans are asked about welfare, it has been distorted beyond recognition. In the end, so is welfare policy. How does this happen? In this meticulously researched and well-written book, Gilens documents how many Americans come to misunderstand welfare and how those misunderstandings influence welfare policy making. For Gilens, a prime culprit is the news media. Moving from portraits of public opinion to analyses of news reporting to finally a critical examination of the welfare reforms of recent years, Gilens adroitly uses a variety of empirical sources to demonstrate that (1) Americans are supportive of government aid to “deserving” recipients; (2) they are however misinformed about who is receiving assistance because of how the news media misrepresent welfare recipients; (3) visual misrepresentations are especially influential and misleadingly overrepresent African-American, single mothers as recipients; (4) journalists and editors in particular are almost as misinformed as the general public about the real proportionate breakdowns of the welfare population as well as the extent of their own misreporting; and (5) race is systematically related to the making of welfare policy, with welfare being considered a “black” program that therefore is less deserving of support.

What an indictment, especially given the methods and data used. Gilens creatively analyzes public opinion polling data to illuminate mass support for not just the welfare state in the abstract, but also for welfare to the poor in particular. Gilens reviews his already widely noted, previously published research on racial attitudes and opposition to welfare. This book however goes well beyond the survey data. It builds on other work Gilens has done on news media representations of welfare recipients. In perhaps the most interesting section, there is an analysis of how media representations of people living in poverty have changed over time. Gilens finds that overrepresentation of African-Americans in stories

about poverty started to increase in the 1960s when rapid growth in the number of welfare recipients occurred under conditions of political instability, racial turmoil, and civil unrest. Gilens notes that the welfare population both black and white grew during this period in proportionate amounts, maintaining whites as the largest group. Yet, the public increasingly came to see welfare as a program for African-Americans. Gilens finds that the news media have for years now overrepresented African-Americans in negative stories about poverty and welfare and that these are tied to the growing mass antipathy toward welfare.

Gilens not only makes a real contribution to understanding the role of mass communication in the making of social welfare policy, his work here adds significantly to the growing body of research that demonstrates that the news media do not simply reinforce existing political attitudes but change them as well. Gilens's analysis eventually turns to the role of race in the welfare retrenchment of 1996. He helps us understand how the public could come to support draconian welfare reforms even as it opposed cutting back assistance levels to those who are genuinely needy. With careful attention to the particulars of welfare reform, Gilens reviews survey data to suggest that Americans supported the welfare retrenchment of 1996 based on the mistaken assumption that most welfare recipients were underserving, that is, were not trying to achieve personal responsibility in regards to work and family.

Yet, it is here and in its conclusion that this excellent book falls short. Gilens is too content to accept as legitimate that the American public relies on the prevailing distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. He faults the news media not for reinforcing this problematic distinction but only for misrepresenting it. The implication is that if the stories had been accurate, that is, if most adult welfare recipients were African-American, single mothers who chose welfare over work, then the public's opposition to welfare would be justified. Gilens's implied solution is to counter these false images with more correct images of recipients as people from a variety of ethnicities who are trying to become self-sufficient. This is not enough. It leaves the false dichotomy of merit intact, allowing it to continue to marginalize poor single mothers who need public assistance in lieu of the inadequate support that paid employment might provide them. Simply put, Gilens fails to consider the possibility that no one "deserves" to be poor. If he had done so, he could go beyond emphasizing that the media exaggerate the extent to which African-Americans rely on welfare to the more critical issue of how the political economy systematically works to relegate disproportionate numbers of African-Americans to lives of poverty and deprivation.

Gilens effectively uses the "master's tools" in the form of quantitative analysis of public opinion data, but without enough of the necessary critical reflection. He recognizes these tools can only take us so far; however, his limited conclusion suggests we need to go further.