The Curious Case of Shirley Sherrod:

Racist Vigilante or Tolerant Emancipator?

Wisdom Amouzou

University Of Colorado At Boulder
Public Opinion, a 1925 publishing by Walter Lippmann challenged the influence of the media and brought its’ catastrophic potential to the forefront of American discourses. The phrase coined and circulated by Lippmann was “the pictures in our heads”. Lippmann essentially argued against any false notion of shared truth, rather, he attempted to portray truth as a mere dynamic, a collection of interpretations and projections. This concept is further described when he says “the only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event” (Lippmann, 1997: 13). What is critical for Lippmann, though, is his acknowledgment and realization of the embedded biases which must inherently limit our understanding of each other’s actions, purposes, and basic human nature. By viewing this event as a racial project that is a part of a larger racial formation, the significant and powerful role which media plays in shaping the images in our mind can be analyzed. Using this concept of the “images in our minds” and the racial formation framework, the racial ideologies inherent in the case of Shirley Sherrod will be unearthed.

Prior to Andrew Breitbart’s posting of a video segment of Shirley Sherrod’s speech at the NAACP, she was an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The clip depicted Sherrod as a racist who purposefully denied her full authority to help a white farmer due to the color of his skin. Before the sun went down on July 19th 2010, she was already receiving harassing phone calls from Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack’s office begging for her resignation. The story was relentlessly aired on practically every news channel that night. After her termination by the USDA, statements were issued from the NAACP denouncing her prejudiced actions. The controversy, though, was highlighted when more comprehensive evidence surfaced. A closer inspection of the video clip posted by Breitbart showed major editing and clipping was done on the original video. This drastically changed the context of the meaning behind Sherrod’s words.
The context of the edited video clip begun to make more sense as Breitbart’s reasons became public. He posted the video in retaliation to the NAACP’s claim depicting the Tea Party Federation as a racist organization. On air with Sean Hannity, he described the NAACP’s actions as “a technique of propaganda” (Anon 2010). By July 20th, the original narrative of Shirley Sherrod the avenging racist had been discredited. But by then, the damage had already been done; President Obama and the NAACP were used as scapegoats to partition the blame (Frum, David 2010).

By minimizing the problem of race in America and declaring racism as a problem of the past, neoconservative bloggers such as Andrew Breitbart are able to easily tap into the “reverse racism” propaganda of past White House administrations. The fact that an organization such as the NAACP so quickly accepted those fallacious claims emphasizes the power and influence of these paradigms. Using the racial formation framework, the narrative of the portrayal of Shirley Sherrod in that edited clip serves as a neoconservative racial project seeking to fortify contemporary color blind racism. Richard Kim summarizes the phenomena well when he thanks Breitbart for providing “us with a perfect visual condensation of the racial paranoia that has animated the Tea Party since its inception” (2010). Though much more abrasive and loud than clandestine and quiet, racial projects such as this one are the perfect tool to propagate “race coding” (Gilens 1996). This racial project seems simple enough in nature but it truly is intricately weaved at the micro and macro levels. Breitbart was absolutely right in saying “this is not about Shirley Sherrod”. It’s actually about undermining the legitimacy and objectives of the NAACP. By portraying Shirley Sherrod as a racist practicing “reverse racism”, the hope is that her image will be translated and coded onto President Obama in the minds of American citizens. In simple terms, Shirley Sherrod was meant to be Obama’s Willie Horton.
The multiple racial projects supported by the Tea Party are deeply rooted in the four central frames of colorblind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of race (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Breitbart uses Sherrod’s comments on sending the farmer to one of “his kind”, a white lawyer, to perpetuate the frame of naturalization. By totally ignoring the conclusion of that story, Sherrod becoming close friends with the farmer she once perceived as the “other”, Breitbart easily contextualizes her words to a more racist understanding. To further analyze this racial project, the use of a black woman in place of power denying a poor white man is evidence of Breitbart’s tokenistic fallacy (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009). The lens of his video is focused in such a way that puts to rest the myth of racism, but supports the notion of reverse racism. The same tokenistic fallacy was effectively examined and challenged in Tim Wise’s article, “Between Barack and a Hard Place”. Wise states, the election of a black president might “deepen the denial in which so much of the white public has been embedded for generations.” But perhaps the most menacing ideology transmitted through Breitbart’s video clip is this underlying theme of resentment. It ultimately combines the central frames of abstract liberalism and minimization of racism to portray the individualism of colorblind racism, and maintain the stratification of racial categories. Breitbart portrays this when he says

“the point is that the NAACP at a dinner honoring this person is cheering on a person describing a white person as the other. This is far worse than anything that has ever been alleged against the Tea Party” (Anon 2010).

In this statement, he is very much so actively defending his white privilege and acknowledging the historically dominant paradigm of whiteness as normal, natural, and American. Omi and Winant describe the process of racial formation as the connection between structure and
representation. “Racial projects do the ideological ‘work’ of making these links” (Omi and Winant 1994). The complexity of this racial project accurately depicts the level of work that these racial projects exert on aggressively fortifying racial hegemony.

In *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann offers a critical examination of media. He understands the vast complexity which composes our world, and goes further to describe the limited comprehension which anyone of us can attain at a particular time. From the images in our minds, we simplify the complexity of our world until we are able to construct pseudo-environments. The media which serves American citizens absolutely meets the demands of a modern world becoming increasingly interdependent; but it has failed to deconstruct these pseudo-environments. “If his atlas tells him that the world is flat he will not sail near what he believes to be the edge of our planet for fear of falling off” (Lippmann 1997:25). This is why we must be concerned with the pictures in our heads, because we must seek to understand how they frame our conceptions. As made apparent by the case of Shirley Sherrod, a great deal of dysfunction arises from refusing to acknowledge the artificial nature of our constructions and understandings of the world. As consumers of the racial projects transmitted by the media, we silently succumb to racial hegemony and grow even more incognizant of the realities of the world we’ve inherited.
Works Cited


