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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Marable, Manning
Publisher	UNRISD
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Download date	2026-11-18 20:15:31
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RACISM and PUBLIC POLICY

Durban, South Africa
3 - 5 September 2001

CONFERENCE PAPER

Structural Racism and American Democracy

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Manning Marable

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UNRISD work for the Racism and Public Policy Conference is being carried out with the support of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. UNRISD also thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.

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Structural Racism and American Democracy: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Manning Marable

Paper prepared for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Conference on *Racism and Public Policy*, September 2001, Durban, South Africa

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A century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African-American scholar and co-founder of the NAACP, predicted that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, –the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."[1] In truth, the color line Du Bois described has been a prominent feature of American life since its origins in the seventeenth century. From the vantagepoint of people of color, and especially Americans of African descent, our collective histories and experiences of interaction with the white majority have been largely defined around a series of oppressive institutions and practices. While laws have changed regarding the treatment of racialized minorities over the years, the deep structure of white prejudice, power and privilege which has formed the undemocratic foundation of most human interactions has not fundamentally been altered. In order for American democracy finally to become a reality for all of its citizens, we must, first, understand historically how and why these deep structures of racial inequality came into being, and how they were most decisively expressed in the daily lives and life chances of minorities and whites alike.

When we talk about race, we don't mean a biological or genetic category, but rather, a way of interpreting differences between people which creates or reinforces inequalities among them. In other words, "race" is an unequal relationship between social groups, represented by the privileged access to power and resources by one group over another. Race is socially constructed, created (and recreated) by how people are perceived and treated in the normal actions of everyday life. As such, "race" is never fixed. It is a dynamic, constantly changing relationship. Some groups which are defined as an "inferior race" within American society at a certain historical moment, may successfully escape racialization and become part of the privileged majority, the "whites." Other groups, especially those who are descended from African, Latino, American Indian, Pacific Islander and Asian descent, have found the path for group socioeconomic mobility far more difficult. The unequal boundaries of color have been at times permanent barriers to the economic development, educational and social advancement for millions of Americans, living in what for them was a deeply flawed and often hypocritical democracy.

The fundamental problem for the viability of American democracy, therefore, may be the problem of what can be termed "structural racism": whether the majority of American people, its leaders, political organizations and institutions, have the capacity and vision to dismantle the complex structural barriers which severely curtail the democratic rights and socioeconomic opportunities of millions of their fellow citizens—who are African American, Latino, American Indian, Arab American and Asian and Pacific Island Americans. Does this nation possess the political courage to affirm these truths as self-evident, that all citizens regardless of race are born with certain unalienable rights, and that first among these is the right to exist as human beings? Can democracy be more than an abstract ideal, when tens of millions of its citizens feel alienated and marginalized by what have become the "normal" and routine consequences of American racialization in daily life? I believe that a multicultural democracy can be achieved within American public life: a civil society that treats every

citizen with fairness and respect, a political culture that encourages the broadest possible involvement and participation in decision-making processes of all racialized groups and social classes, and a criminal justice system that does not routinely stigmatize entire classes of individuals solely due to their physical appearance. The difficult political and moral challenge is to transform those lofty ideals into a democratic movement that has the capacity to transform the real structure of racial power in society.

More than a half century ago, sociologist Gunmar Myrdal characterized structural racism inside the United States as "an American Dilemma."[2] Although racism has been central to the construction of U.S. society, it is of course not solely an American problem. Less than one year from now, representatives throughout the world will travel to South Africa, to participate in the Third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), sponsored by the United Nations, from August 31 through September 7, 2001. The Conference Against Racism is the culmination of many years' planning and organized outreach, involving several thousand groups, including faith-based institutions, unions, governmental representatives, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs.) Some of the immediate objectives of the conference and the mass mobilization behind it are to strengthen networks involved in anti-racist activities, both within individual states and internationally, and to bring human rights activists into closer contact and coordination with each other. The theoretical orientation implied by the WCAR's mobilization is that racial inequality cannot be understood or dismantled solely within the political contexts of nation-states; and that the coordinated collective efforts of NGOs, reflecting the activities of civil societies independent of governmental involvement or control, are essential to the process of transforming racial hierarchies.

Here in the United States, our government has chosen not to inform the general public about the WCAR, or that various representatives from civil rights groups, religious institutions and universities, are being invited to the White House to discuss what positions and role this country should take in this international process. Perhaps the unfortunate failure of President Clinton's 1997-98 Race Initiative, which was comprised by his own misconduct in public office, persuaded members of the administration to move more cautiously. Perhaps it is the fear that any well-publicized discourse about the continuing burden of racial oppression in American life would generate difficulties for Al Gore's presidential campaign.

For several centuries, African-American leaders and civil rights organizations have taken view that racism as a system of structural inequality had to be critiqued globally, in a worldwide context, rather than focusing exclusively on what's happening to minorities inside the United States. The two central architects of African-American political thought, Frederick Douglass and Martin R. Delany, both in different ways viewed the questions of slavery and the emancipation of black people in a manner that incorporated international issues. During the Second World War, the board of directors of the NAACP, issued a direct challenge to the Roosevelt administration, declaring that the United States should be "utterly opposed . . . to any policy which means freedom for white people are any part of the white people of the earth on one hand, and continued exploitation of colored peoples, on the other. We ask that it be made clear that the United States will not in any fashion, direct or indirect, uphold continued exploitation of India,

China, Abyssinia and other African areas, the West Indies, or of any other part of the world."[3] With the subsequent formation of the United Nations, a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by its General Assembly in 1948. Fifteen years later, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a more extensive statement, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. To realize the objectives of this Declaration, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was established in 1965. The Convention's

definition of racial discrimination is: "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life."[4]

This definition of racial discrimination, seemingly comprehensive, was also restrictive in some ways. The 1965 International Convention was not applied to member governments' policies of "distinctions, exclusions, restrictions, (and) preferences" made between citizen vs. noncitizens in their own countries. Legal restrictions concerning the establishment of citizenship or naturalization were also excluded from the definition of racism, so long as specific nationalities were not treated differently from other groups under the law. Policies which in the United States have been termed "affirmative action," or frequently in Europe as "positive discrimination," are not defined as racism, so long as such corrective measures do not create a privileged status for certain racial groups. This terminology doesn't address the social intolerance and discrimination of certain religious groups or faith-based institutions, which is a serious and growing problem throughout the world. And finally, the UN definition of racial discrimination doesn't adequately consider the problem of coerced or forced assimilation, the extermination of a population's cultural distinctiveness. In the United States and most European countries in recent years, extremist conservative political movements have arisen against new Third World immigrant populations, which advocate discrimination against the speaking of certain languages, such as "English Only" campaigns, or the harassment of non-Western cultures, such as Muslim culture.[5]

For various political reasons, the United States has largely remained apart from the general global discussion about racism. The U.S. government refused to recognize the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination for many years. After all, the United States had maintained a legal system of Jim Crow segregation for nearly a century, and could not easily acknowledge the vast racial contradictions of its own history. Only under the administration of George Bush did the United States become a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, but only did so conditionally, with stipulations. There is also the strong tendency within the United States to perceive the world from the peculiar vantagepoint of the American experience. Thus "race," which is something most Americans already think they know a good deal about, is rarely interrogated or understood comparatively or transnationally.

What can be learned from a global perspective on racism? Anthropologist Etienne Balibar provides some useful insights along these lines. All social formations constructed around the idea of race are posited upon the concepts of "frontiers" or "boundaries." A nation or a people only have integrity when there are boundaries that separate us from the Other. Sometimes boundaries are literally that, geopolitical divisions that serve to separate neighboring populations. But more frequently, the "frontiers" are actually the constantly shifting boundaries that are used to separate individuals from each other within the same societies. "This is the double function of the notion of frontier," Balibar argues. "What theoretical racism calls 'race' or 'culture' (or both) is therefore a birthright of the nation, an historical backbone, a concentration of qualities that belong 'exclusively' to the nationals: it is in the race of 'its children' that the nation can contemplate its true identity at its purest. Consequently, it is to the race that the nation must cleave."[6] In the American experience, the frontier was the physical boundary separating European settlers from potentially hostile American Indians. But it was also, in many ways, the barrier separating the slave shanties from the masters' mansions. Affiliation to the nation through citizenship was closely tied to one's position in the racial hierarchy. This helps to explain why the vast majority of Asians born in Asia who emigrated to the U.S. were not legally allowed to become citizens until 1952. This is why Native Americans, the only group truly indigenous to the continent, were excluded from citizenship until 1924. It is also the reason that the

majority of African Americans, who had been extended the rights of citizenship in 1865, were not permitted to vote in a presidential election until 1964.

Frontiers between nations frequently change over time. Boundaries are disputed, and redrawn as the results of wars or negotiations. Similarly, racial frontiers in a racist society, while appearing to be fixed, never are. They shift over time, as certain groups who have at one point been defined as outsiders to the race/nation are assimilated within it. Individuals within oppressed groups may, based on their phenotype or physical appearance, may transgress the boundaries of race by "passing." Oppositional or social protest movements by those defined as subordinate groups may force the white majority to negotiate new rules, new boundaries that permit limited access and opportunity for non-whites. Balibar's point here is that the national and racial identities and superstructures are so interwoven, that an "obsessive imperative" is established which demands the "'racialization' of populations and social groups whose collective features will be designated stigmata of exteriority and impurity."[7] Thus non-white or non-European Others must be invented, even where they do not exist. Or thinking about this as a type of social negation, whites can only exist as "whites" when a group is relegated to the inferior status of being non-white. Without a racialized Other, "whites" cease to exist.

It is a mistake, however, to think of racism primarily as a national phenomenon, or located within particular forms of nationalism. As Balibar points out, one of the characteristics that gives racism such longevity is its ability to transcend individual nation-states. In a kind of twisted way, racism has a universal quality as "supernationalism." "Since there is no way to find racial-national purity or to guarantee its source in the origins of the people, it must be fabricated," Balibar argues. The supernationalism of racism "tends to idealize certain timeless, or pseudotemporal, communities" such as "the West" or "civilized man." The state of being civilized allows white travelers to cross boundaries that separate western nations by language, religious beliefs, culture and ethnicity. The real frontiers therefore become interior, that is, "inseparable from the individuals."[8] Thus black people in a society built on white racism are those individuals who carry their essentialist frontiers or boundaries around with them wherever they go.

Racism always manifests itself among its proponents as an all-encompassing worldview, a way of interpreting and understanding phenomena. Balibar observes that "racism is a philosophy of history, or better yet a historiosophy, by which I mean a philosophy that merges with an interpretation of history, but makes history the consequence of a 'secret' hidden and revealed to men about their own nature and birth; a philosophy that reveals the invisible cause of the destiny of societies and peoples…."[9]

The philosophy justifying racial hierarchy thus not only provide an explanation for the continuation of racial conflicts throughout the world, but also a historically-grounded method for thinking about the real differences in physical appearance that separate human beings from each other. In this mental universe, some people are simply "destined" to live in the netherworld of inferiority. Others can claim a "natural" superiority, which is validated by the forces of history.

The entire logic of racism points toward the inevitability of conflict between racial groups, and the ultimate inability to negotiate a long-term agreement with the racialized Other. Because the Other doesn't share our biological origins, values and culture, it can never be trusted to fulfill its promises. Coercion is ultimately the only language it understands. Over twenty years ago, during a fellowship I held at Aspen Institute, I became acquainted with General Edward Rowney, who would subsequently become the Reagan Administration's chief arms negotiator with the Soviet Union. Both Rowney and I were participants in an Aspen Institute Executive Seminar, and we traveled by shuttle bus together from our housing quarters to the seminar site daily. One day I asked Rowney about the prospects for peace, and he replied that meaningful negotiations with the Russian Communists were impossible.

"The Russians," Rowney explained, never experienced the Renaissance, or took part in Western civilization or culture. I pressed the point, asking whether the real problem was Russia's adherence to Communism. Rowney snapped, "Communism has nothing to do with it." He looked thoughtfully for a moment, and then said simply, "the real problem with Russians is that they are Asiatics."[10] What Rowney was saying is that there was a distinctly racial foundation for the Cold War that transcended the conflict between capitalism and Communism. This raises the interesting question of whether the Russians, having now overthrown Communism, have become "white."

The Rowney story reveals not only a "civilizational" or even cultural deterministic foundation to the mentality of the Cold War, but some important insights into the "logic" of racialized thinking. The forces of history, if not biology, have "fixed" the racialized Other, suspended through time and space. It is not the overt behavior of the racialized Other that the racist finds so objectionable. It is his or her very being. The reduction of social conflict can only be achieved either through the forced subordination and perhaps even the physical elimination of the Other. It is this kind of thinking that has constructed what legal scholar Randall Kennedy describes as "America's paradigmatic racial pariah, the Negro . . . . Racist perceptions of blacks have given energy to policies and practices (such as racial exclusion in housing, impoverished schooling, and stingy social welfare programs) that have facilitated the growth of egregious, crime-spawning conditions that millions of Americans face in urban slums and rural backwaters across the nation."[11] Thus it is not the objective reality of difference between "races" that produces disparities and social inequality between groups; it is structural racism that reproduces "races."

II

The central difficulty in uprooting racism in America's consciousness, its identity of itself as a nation or a people, is that racism predates national identity. Decades before the American revolution, enslaved African Americans and American Indians were specifically excluded from the social contract which linked individuals and classes to the state through sets of rights and responsibilities. What evolved was a uniquely American racial formation—a dynamic set of discourses and racialized stereotypes, hierarchies of dominant and subordinate behaviors in both public and private settings, the organization of political institutions, and the patterns of economic production and ownership to preserve white privilege and power. The reality of American structural racism, even more than the omnipresent factors of gender oppression and class location, set the rough parameters for group participation and individual mobility within the national society. Citizenship was defined in very practical terms by determining whether one belonged to the "racialized Other" group, or did not. Thus "whiteness" became the gateway through which successive waves of European immigrants gained admission, access and advancement into American civil and political society. As political scientist Robert Lieberman has observed:

> Racial division in any society is not a simple fact; it is a complex condition, deeply contextual and situated in a set of particular social relations. It is the product not merely of shades of skin pigmentation distributed among the population but of the belief that such differences matter and above all of structures that constitute regular patterns of social, economic and political understanding and behavior according to these shadings. Political institutions, one form that such structures can take, can thus reflect the racial basis of social distinctions in the society's power structure. The state, in short, may stand on a racial foundation.[12]

Over several centuries, as America's political economy has evolved and matured, there have been several important changes in how the racialized Other was socially controlled. American Indians were subjected to a series of genocidal wars that marginalized them to specific reservations, a kind of territorial apartheid, to the point of near extermination. People of African descent were almost universally defined as chattel slaves, that is, the physical property of whites. Throughout the colonial and early national periods of Americans, most white Americans did not own slaves. In fact, on the eve of the Civil War, only one in four white Southerners owned slaves. Nevertheless, enslavement was what could be termed the defining factor of social control which governed American race relations. Ninety percent of all African Americans were slaves, and even free blacks in the northeast and midwest were subjected to severe restrictions regarding their civil rights, social and economic opportunities. In the language of the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court in 1857, the Founding Fathers never intended for the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution "to embrace the Negro race, which, by common consent, had been excluded from civilized governments and the family of nations and doomed to slavery." Black Americans were generally regarded "as beings of an inferior order and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."[13]

It was from this inherently contradictory position on race that America's master narrative on democracy was forged. The United States was formed with a republican form of government, and a model of citizenship which appeared to be inclusive. It established a democratic political and legal framework that was based on a lively civil society, with safeguards for individual liberty guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. The national democratic narrative guaranteed that economic opportunity would be available to all, and that though individual initiative and sacrifice, that all citizens could through their merit achieve a decent life. Yet interwoven within the national political culture was the reality of whiteness, a privileged racial category justified by negative racist stereotypes, passed down from generation to generation, so as to become acceptable, normal, and part of the public common sense. Consequently, the Declaration of Independence (written by a Southern plantation owner who owned two hundred slaves) and the Dred Scott decision are two aspects of the identical political dynamic: democracy was for whites only.

America's first racial domain or formation eventually collapsed, not just from the weight of its enormous social contradictions, but from the concerted opposition of African Americans and their white antislavery allies. Despite numerous slave insurrections, the tens of thousands of blacks who escaped to the North and Canada, and the day-to-day resistance of slaves themselves, slavery as a system of white supremacy and black subordination survived for nearly 250 years. It took a Civil War, which included the military participation of over 180,000 African Americans, to finally destroy this specific racial domain.

After the South's brief experiment in democracy called Reconstruction, a second racial domain, sets of hierarchies of dominant and subordinate relationships, came into existence, called Jim Crow segregation. Unlike slavery, African Americans were no longer defined as property but as citizens, with a certain set of legal entitlements. Under the Jim Crow system, in most Southern cities there was no extreme pattern of residential segregation—that is, the concentration of neighborhoods exclusively inhabited by members of one racialized ethnic group. However, the racial hierarchy was maintained by other means: the political disenfranchisement of black males, the inability to run for public office, the imposition of local and state laws requiring the rigid separation of the races in schools and all types of public accommodations, the erosion of basic Constitutional rights such as the freedom of speech and public assembly. Behind and reinforcing this structure of white supremacy and black subordination was the reality of mass violence and terror. In rural areas, social control of the

black population occurred primarily through a brutal control of labor, through sharecropping, debt peonage and the widespread use of convict labor. Lynching was also an essential feature in the social exploitation of African Americans across the region. Between 1882 and 1927, an estimated 3,513 African Americans were lynched, about 95 percent of whom were in the South.[14]

As with slavery, whiteness and blackness still defined the social hierarchy of the South. But the essential defining factor of racial domination was not economic, but political. African American entrepreneurs frequently used racial segregation as a barrier, permitting the construction of black producer and consumer markets. Blacks established banks, schools, and dozens of all-black towns in the rural South, and within two generations after slavery had acquired over 15 million acres of land. Booker T. Washington, the famous Negro educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, was the principal spokesman for this emerging black entrepreneurship. But there was always a crude racial ceiling imposed on black upward mobility across the region, imposed by the Jim Crow system. Describing race relations in the South in the 1940s, Gunmar Myrdal comments that the Negro's "name is the antonym of white. As the color white is associated with everything good, with Christ and the angels, with heaven, fairness, cleanliness, virtue, intelligence, courage, and progress, so black has, through the ages, carried associations with all that is bad and low . . . The Negro is believed to be stupid, immoral, diseased, lazy, incompetent, and dangerous—dangerous to the white man's virtue and social order."[15] The racial hierarchy was most clearly and unambiguously expressed in the South's legal system. Writing in 1941, sociologists Allison Davis, Burleigh and Mary Gardner observed that the Southern "Negro is, from the very beginning, in a position subordinate to both the police and the court . . . . There are no Negro officers, judges, lawyers, or jurymen. The only role a Negro can take is that of defendant or witness, except in a few types of civil cases. Furthermore, the Negro has no part in making that laws which the court system enforces. As a defendant, he faces the white man's court . . . . The law is white."[16]

In the Northern states by the first half of the twentieth century, the racial domain evolved in a strikingly different way. The percentage of blacks living in the South fell from 89 percent in 1910 to 53 percent in 1970, as millions migrated to the northeast and midwest to escape Jim Crow, and to acquire a better standard of life. During the same period, the proportion of African Americans living in urban areas rose from 27 percent to 81 percent.[17] Blacks again encountered racial segregation in the North, but a much milder variety. Blacks were usually permitted to vote, serve on juries and exercise their Constitutional rights. They were not barred from state-funded universities and professional schools, although in some states these institutions were segregated. Patterns of exclusion at restaurants and hotels existed, but were not uniform. There was a deep pattern of employment discrimination, with many unions refusing to extend membership to African Americans, and many employers drawing the color line, especially in professional and managerial positions. But the central defining factor of Northern racial formation was the near-universal pattern of residential segregation. As documented by sociologists Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton in American Apartheid, the American ghetto was first constructed primarily in the North. Restrictive covenants, widespread racial discrimination by banks and financial lending institutions, and even the loan policies by the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration led to an extreme concentration of racialized minorities in most U.S. cities. Between 1950 and 1970, the percentage of African Americans more than doubled in most major urban areas—18 to 34 percent in Philadelphia, 16 to 44 percent in Detroit, 14 to 33 percent in Chicago. Usually about 80 to 90 percent of all blacks living in any city resided in virtually all-black neighborhoods.[18]

The construction of the Northern ghetto created some benefits, but many more liabilities for urban African Americans. The superconcentration of blacks in specific geographical districts made it easier to elect African Americans to local and national offices. It is not surprising, for example, that

Chicago, the first major city to elect an African American to Congress, Oscar DePriest in 1928, had by far the most extensive pattern of residential segregation in the country. Ghettoization also creates the social and cultural context for race-based protest institutions, and to a limited extent, ethnically-oriented consumer markets which served as the basis for minority entrepreneurship as they had in the South. The downside to ghettoization, however, was devastating. Extreme concentrations of poverty created a series of vast social problems, including rampant crime and violence, the undermining of civic institutions of all kinds, and growing social alienation among youth. As the middle class outmigration increased, many businesses relocated outside of the central city, or simply shut down. The quality of urban schools rapidly deteriorated, as the tax base to support public education declined. As Massey and Denton observe, "Barriers to spatial mobility are barriers to social mobility, and by confronting blacks to a small set of relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods, segregation constitutes a very powerful impediment to black socioeconomic progress…. The segregation of American blacks was no historical accident; it was brought about by actions and practices that had the passive acceptance, if not the active support, of most whites in the United States."[19]

Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans and their political allies within the white community waged a protracted campaign to uproot both domains of racial inequality. In the 1950s in the Deep South, the black freedom movement took the form of nonviolent civil disobedience against restrictions of Jim Crow. Although its most prominent spokespersons such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., were middle class, the vast majority of local leaders and grassroots activists were predominantly working class and poor people, and many were women. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 finally outlawed racial segregation in public accommodations throughout the nation, and the Voting Rights Act the following year permitted millions of Southern blacks to vote for the first time in their lives. Although racial segregation still persists in private institutions, such as country clubs and fraternal associations, the formal, legal framework for Jim Crow was finally destroyed.

Organized efforts to dismantle structural racism in the North, however, proved to be profoundly more difficult. Northern white liberals didn't object to Negroes gaining the right to vote or eating in restaurants, so long as they didn't move next door. The backlash began in "the bastion of California liberalism," Berkeley, in early 1963 when a referendum on a local ordinance banning racial discrimination in all real estate sales and rentals, was defeated with 83 percent voter turnout. The next year, California voters statewide approved Proposition 14, which proposed to amend the state constitution "to guarantee a home owner's right to sell only to whom he or she wished to sell," by a two-to-one margin. That same year, Detroit voters approved a "Home Owners' Rights Ordinance" that was designed to maintain that city's pattern of residential segregation.[20] When Martin Luther King, Jr., moved the focus of the desegregation struggle from the Deep South to Chicago, emphasizing employment opportunities and fair housing for Negroes, he encountered fierce resistance from white ethnics. Thousands of white men, women and children hurled rocks, bottles and even knives at unarmed nonviolent demonstrators. King was so shaken that he later admitted, "I have never seen such hostility and hatred anywhere in my life, even in Selma."[21] Despite the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, blacks of all social classes found themselves increasingly socially isolated from the rest of society. This pattern of residential exclusion was strikingly different for that of Asian Americans and Latinos, who could for the most part escape residential segregation by enhancing their income and socioeconomic status. In other words, as education, occupation and income increase, Latino and Asian American segregation sharply falls, whereas "only blacks experience a pattern of constant, high segregation that is impervious to socioeconomic influences."[22]

Thus, despite the successful legal and political efforts to outlaw racial segregation, the majority of African Americans continued to feel largely excluded from the American Dream—the national narrative of inevitable progress, individual liberty and expanding opportunity. At a Yale

University lecture in 1951, W.E.B. Du Bois spoke to this sense of racial stigmatization and exclusion felt by every African American. “Negroes are not fond of posing before the world as step-children and outcasts in their native land,” Du Bois observed sadly. Through more than 300 years of struggle, black Americans “have progressed but in the name of God never forget the distance they have still have to go. And remember that the man who is climbing out of a well would best not waste too much time, celebrating, when first he sees light above.”[23]

III

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed, in many respects, an unparalleled record of accomplishment and success for African Americans. Racial progress could be measured in many different ways, from the growth of elected officials (from less than 100 in 1964 to nearly 5,000 in 1980), to the expansion of the black consumer market (estimated at $30 billion in 1960, $70 billion in 1973, and $300 billion by 1995).[24] Blacks were increasingly represented in national popular culture, from entertainment to professional athletics. The numbers of African Americans enrolled in colleges and universities rose from about 200,000 in 1960 to 1.1 million in 1980. Nevertheless, despite these real material advances, the structural foundations of racial inequality had not been dismantled. The legal structures of Jim Crow had indeed been dismantled. “But slavery and colonialism may not, either together or separately, wholly determine the racial structure of the state,” Robert Lieberman observes. “Moreover, race can infect the shape of political institutions even without being legally encoded in the state—as in social policy institutions, the party structure, or working-class development.”[25] What subsequently happened in the U.S. is that race “infected” the American criminal justice system’s processes at all levels, in unprecedented ways, without expressing itself overtly as a racialist structure.

For a variety of reasons, rates of violent crime, including murder, rape and robbery, increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of this increase occurred in urban areas, which were heavily populated by Latino and African-American poor and working class people. In the mid- and late sixties, a series of violent racial uprisings devastated dozens of major urban areas. In 1967 alone, urban insurrections occurred in 56 cities, totaling 56 deaths and 3,800 injuries, with hundreds of millions of dollars in property destruction. In the Miami rebellion of May, 1980, eighteen people were killed and property damage surpassed 80 million dollars.[26] By the late 1970s, nearly one half of all Americans were afraid to walk within a mile of their homes at night, and 90 percent responded in surveys that the U.S. criminal justice system was not dealing harshly enough with criminals.[27] Politicians like Richard M. Nixon, George Wallace and Ronald Reagan began to campaign successfully on the theme of “Law and Order.” The death penalty, which was briefly outlawed by the Supreme Court, was reinstated. Local, state and federal expenditures for law enforcement rose sharply. Behind much of anti-crime rhetoric was a not-too-subtle racial dimension, the projection of crude stereotypes about the link between criminality and black people. Rarely did these politicians observe that minority and poor people, not the white middle class, were statistically much more likely to experience violent crimes of all kinds. The argument was made that law enforcement officers should be given much greater latitude in suppressing crime, that sentences should be lengthened and made mandatory, and that prisons should be designed not for the purpose of rehabilitation, but punishment.

Consequently, there was a rapid expansion in the personnel of the criminal justice system, as well as the construction of new prisons. What occurred in New York State, for example, was typical of what happened nationally. From 1817 to 1981, New York had opened 33 state prisons. From 1982 to 1999, another 38 state prisons were constructed. The state’s prison population at the time of the Attica prison revolt in September 1971 was about 12,500. By 1999, there were over 71,000 prisoners in New York State correctional facilities.[28]

In 1974, the number of Americans incarcerated in all state prisons stood at 187,500. By 1991, the number had reached 711,700. Nearly two-thirds of all state prisoners in 1991 had less than a high school education. One third of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of their arrests.[29] Incarceration rates by the end of the 1980s had soared to unprecedented rates, especially for black Americans. As of December 1989, the total U.S. prison population, including federal institutions, exceeded one million for the first time in history, an incarceration rate of the general population of one out of every 250 citizens. For African Americans, the rate was over 700 per 100,000, or about seven times more than for whites. About one half of all prisoners were black. Twenty-three percent of all black males in their twenties were either in jail or prison, on parole, probation or awaiting trial. The rate of incarceration of black Americans in 1989 had even surpassed that experienced by blacks who still lived under the apartheid regime of South Africa.[30]

By the early 1990s, rates for all types of violent crime began to plummet. But the laws which sent offenders to prison, were made even more severe. Children were increasingly viewed in courts as adults, and subjected to harsher penalties. Laws like California's "three strikes and you're out" eliminated the possibility of parole for repeat offenders. The vast majority of these new prisoners were non-violent offenders, and many of these were convicted of drug offenses that carried long prison terms. In New York, a state in which African Americans and Latinos comprise 25 percent of the total population, by 1999 they represented 83 percent of all state prisoners, and 94 percent of all individuals convicted on drug offenses. The pattern of racial bias in these statistics is confirmed by the research of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which found that while African Americans today constitute only 14 percent of all drug users nationally, they are 35 percent of all drug arrests, 55 percent of all drug convictions, and 75 percent of all prison admissions for drug offenses. Currently, the racial proportions of those under some type of correctional supervision, including parole and probation, are one-in-fifteen for young white males, one-in-ten for young Latino males, and one-in-three for young African-American males. Statistically today, more than eight out of every ten African-American males will be arrested at some point in their lifetime.[31]

The latest innovation in American corrections is termed "special housing units" (SHU), but which prisoners also generally refer to as The Box. SHUs are uniquely designed solitary confinement cells, in which prisoners are locked down for 23 hours a day for months or even years at a time. SHU cellblocks are electronically monitored, prefabricated structures of concrete and steel, about 14 feet long and 8 ½ feet wide, amounting to 120 square feet of space. The two inmates who are confined in each cell, however, actually have only about 60 square feet of usable space, or 30 square feet per person. All meals are served to prisoners through a thin slot cut into the steel door. The toilet unit, sink and shower are all located in the cell. Prisoners are permitted one hour "exercise time" each day in a small concrete balcony, surrounded by heavy security wire, directly connected with their SHU cells. Educational and rehabilitation programs for SHU prisoners are prohibited. As of 1998, New York State had confined 5,700 state prisoners in SHUs, about 8 percent of its total inmate population. Currently under construction in upstate New York is a new 750-cell maximum security SHU facility, which will cost state taxpayers $180 million. Although Amnesty International and human rights groups in the U.S. have widely condemned SHUs, claiming that such forms of imprisonment constitute the definition of torture under international law, other states have followed New York's example. As of 1998, California had constructed 2,942 SHU beds, followed by Mississippi (1,756), Arizona (1,728), Virginia (1,267), Texas (1,229), Louisiana (1,048) and Florida (1,000). Solitary confinement, which historically had been defined even by corrections officials as an extreme disciplinary measure, is becoming increasingly the norm.[32]

The introduction of SHUs reflects a general mood in the country that the growing penal population is essentially beyond redemption. If convicted felons cease to be viewed as human beings,

why should they be treated with any humanity? This punitive spirit was behind the federal government's decision in 1995 to eliminate inmate eligibility for federal Pell Grant awards for higher education. As of 1994, 23,000 prisoners throughout the U.S. had received Pell Grants, averaging about $1,500 per award. The total amount of educational support granted prisoners, $35 million, represented only 0.6 percent of all Pell Grant funding nationally. Many studies have found that prisoners who participate in higher education programs and especially those who complete college degrees have significantly lower rates of recidivism. For all prison inmates, for example, recidivism averages between 50 to 70 percent. Federal parolees have a recidivism rate of 40 percent. Prisoners with a college education have recidivism rates of only 5 to 10 percent. Given the high success ratio of prisoners who complete advanced degree work and the relatively low cost of public investment, such educational programs should make sense. But following the federal government's lead, many states have also ended their tuition benefits programs for state prisoners.[33]

What are the economic costs for American society of the vast expansion of our prison-industrial complex? According to criminal justice researcher David Barlow at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, between 1980 and 2000, the combined expenditures of federal, state and local governments on police have increased about 400 percent. Corrections expenditures for building new prisons, upgrading existing facilities, hiring more guards, and related costs, increased approximately one thousand percent. Although it currently costs about $70,000 to construct a typical prison cell, and about $25,000 annually to supervise and maintain each prisoner, the U.S. is currently building 1,725 new prison beds per week.[34]

The driving ideological and cultural force that rationalized and justifies mass incarceration is the white American public's stereotypical perceptions about race and crime. As Andrew Hacker perceptively noted in 1995, "Quite clearly, 'black crime' does not make people think about tax evasion or embezzling from brokerage firms. Rather, the offenses generally associated with blacks are those . . . involving violence."[35] A number of researchers have found that racial stereotypes of African Americans—as "violent," "aggressive," "hostile" and "short-tempered"—greatly influence whites' judgments about crime. Generally, most whites are inclined to give black and Latino defendants more severe judgments of guilt and lengthier prison sentences than whites who commit identical crimes. Racial bias has been well established especially in capital cases, where killers of white victims are much more likely to receive the death penalty than those who murder African Americans. In a 1994 telephone survey of 504 adults drawn from the Lexington, Kentucky area, researchers Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley found "a substantial and recurrent overlap between negative African-American stereotypes and more punitive views of crime policy among our white respondents . . . ." Blacks were repeatedly judged to be "impossible to rehabilitate," and significantly more likely to "commit a violent crime in the future." Hurwitz and Peffley note that media is partially responsible for "the conflation of race and crime. When audiences see African Americans in televised news stories, it is usually in the context of crime . . . . Blacks are often shown in handcuffs, in mug shots, in physical custody, and to be unnamed and unspoken. In short, they are demonized rather than humanized—a tendency which is not counterbalanced because whites so rarely get to see blacks portrayed in the news as lawful, contributing members of society."[36]

The greatest victims of these racialized processes of unequal justice, of course, are African-American and Latino young people. In April 2000, utilizing national and state data compiled by the FBI, the Justice Department and six leading foundations issued a comprehensive study that documented vast racial disparities at every level of the juvenile justice process. African Americans under age 18 comprise 15 percent of their national age group, yet they currently represent 26 percent of all those who are arrested. After entering the criminal justice system, white and black juveniles with the same records are treated in radically different ways. According to the Justice Department's study,

among white youth offenders, 66 percent are referred to juvenile courts, while only 31 percent of the African-American youth are taken there. Blacks comprise 44 percent of those detained in juvenile jails, 46 percent of all those tried in adult criminal courts, as well as 58 percent of all juveniles who are warehoused in adult prison. In practical terms, this means that for young African Americans who are arrested and charged with a crime, that they are more than six times more likely to be assigned to prison than white youth offenders. For those young people who have never been to prison before, African Americans are nine times more likely than whites to be sentenced to juvenile prisons. For youths charged with drug offenses, blacks are 48 times more likely than whites to be sentenced to juvenile prison. White youths charged with violent offenses are incarcerated on average for 193 days after trial; by contrast, African-American youths are held 254 days, and Latino youths are incarcerated 305 days.[37]

There are today over two million Americans currently incarcerated, and while African Americans and Latinos comprise the majority of that population, the reality of racism should not obscured the equally important class dimensions of mass incarceration. About one-third of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of their arrests. Only 55 percent of the prison population held fulltime jobs. Seventy percent of all prisoners earned less than a $15,000 annual income in the year prior to their arrest, with 32 percent earning under $5,000. Two-thirds of all prisoners have less than a high school level education, and few have any marketable skills to be competitive for employment once they are released. In effect, our prison system has become the chief means of warehousing redundant labor, the unemployed, the unskilled and the poor.

The unprecedented growth of what many critics of the U.S. criminal justice system termed the "prison industrial complex," was not solely the result of the triumph of political conservatism, or from overtly racist attitudes about the treatment of blacks in the courts. In the 1980s and 1990s, the American welfare state was being rapidly dismantled. The social "safety net" which was the legacy of legislative reforms from the New Deal to the Great Society was pulled to the breaking point. President Bill Clinton promised to "end welfare as we know it," and in 1996 secured the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act. While most whites were able to successfully leave welfare—by 198 they represented under one-third of all participants—the vast majority of women of color remained regulated by the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the program that in effect supplanted the old AFDC system. By 2000, welfare "reform" had succeeded in cutting overall welfare rolls in half. But growing evidence suggests that fewer than one in four TANF participants left the welfare rolls because they found employment. Most welfare recipients simply disappeared from the rolls, frequently because they were "sanctioned" for missing appointments or due to their inability to secure childcare. The majority of TANF recipients who do make the transition to employment usually earn between $5.50 to $7.00 per hour, well below the federal government's poverty level for a family of four. A 1999 study of former welfare recipients by researcher Susan Gooden "found that black women earn less than whites, are less likely to be employed full-time, and are overrepresented in lower paying jobs." African-American job seekers "were asked twice as often as whites to complete a pre-application," and 36 percent "were subjected to drug tests and criminal record checks."[38]

As corporations closed their branch offices in the central cities, and businesses relocated to the suburbs, urban centers like Detroit and Newark became economic wastelands. Neighborhoods where labor force participation rates were below sixty percent became commonplace. The federal government, once recognized as the "employer of last resort," retreated from previous entitlements to the poor. It was in this uncertain political environment of governmental retrenchment and economic meltdown that the welfare state gave way to the prison-industrial state as the chief means of regulating and warehousing redundant and minority labor. From the vantagepoint of the working poor and

families below the poverty level in black and brown communities, mass incarceration under the façade of legality and fairness was the essential defining factor.

IV

Within every racial domain in American history, the boundaries of "whiteness" and "blackness" have never been fixed. They have been continually rearticulated and renegotiated, as the political economy of American society was transformed successively from agricultural to industrial production, and as the civil society and political institutions were increasingly forced to incorporate racialized minorities as participants in democratic life. With the growth of class stratification and the abandonment of the most impoverished and crime-ridden neighborhoods by millions of African-American middle and stable working class households, the boundaries of race were reconfigured again in new ways by the end of the twentieth century. The professional and managerial black middle class experienced unprecedented affluence and growing political access within government and both major political parties. To a certain extent, this new black elite still perceived its interests as being linked to those of the "truly disadvantaged," in the words of William Julius Wilson. Their fates or life chances were still to some extent connected by the continuing burden of race. But the decisive ways in which racism manifested itself in daily life for college-educated black professionals vs. the black working poor were increasingly different.

In a recent paper, sociologist Lawrence D. Bobo argues that the traditional color line in American life has not "vanished," but instead has been "merely reconfigured." Jim Crow segregation has been destroyed, and the nation broadly "endorses the goal of racial integration and equal treatment" under the law. "The death of Jim Crow Racism has left us in an uncomfortable place, however," Bobo observes, "a place that I sometime call a state of Laissez Faire racism. We have high ideals, but openness to very limited amounts of integration at the personal level remains, there is political stagnation over some types of affirmative action, quite negative stereotypes of racial minorities persist, and a wide gulf in perceptions regarding the importance of racial discrimination remains."[39] Middle class blacks and Latinos largely accept the national political narrative about the pluralistic promise of American democracy: through individual initiative and personal responsibility that success and upward mobility are possible, and through the acquisition of wealth and private property that the residual affects of racism can be minimized. The fundamental problem with this perspective is that laissez faire racism is still racism, albeit less overt and articulated in the race-neutral language of fairness. The continuing existence of racial inequalities that can be measured in social outcomes is not a product of the lack of individual initiative, but reflect the deep structural barriers that continue to be maintained through the pervasive power of white privilege. Racial inequality therefore presents itself, in the post-Second Reconstruction era, as a "normal" aspect of the general social fabric of American society. There are always "winners" and "losers" in the competition for resources and power. If African Americans still find themselves at the lower end of society's totem pole, the overwhelming logic of common sense is that they have no one to blame but themselves. The analogy which comes to mind is the everyday expression in basketball competition, when two players are physically aggressive in competition, but the referee in the game refuses to call an infraction of the rules against either player: "no harm, no foul."

Here's one example of contemporary structural racism. Why do African Americans, who comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population, total only 7 percent of all recipients of Social Security? The simplest response is that African Americans as a group die years earlier that whites due to higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, etc. Some whites might conclude therefore that blacks simply should

take better care of themselves—better diet, no drugs, maybe some calisthenics every now and then: "No harm, no foul."

Let's look at these unequal health outcomes from the vantagepoint of structural racism. A recent survey of 347 pharmacies in New York City, conducted by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, stated that in black and brown neighborhoods only 25 percent of pharmacies carried enough morphine or morphine-like drugs to treat severe pain, while in white neighborhoods 72 percent did. Because blacks have higher rates of cancer that whites, there should be actually a greater need for medicines treating severe pain. Some pharmacists suggested that "demand was lower in poor neighborhoods because they had higher proportions of uninsured people who could not afford to fill prescriptions."

The problem with that interpretation is that these survey results mirror the same patterns of racism found throughout the health care establishment. As reported in early 2000 in the New York Times, African Americans "are less likely than whites to be referred for kidney transplants or surgery for early stage cancer." Doctors are less likely "to prescribe pain killers for blacks and Latinos with broken bones or postoperative pain." Yet thousands of doctors who routinely behave in this callous manner are convinced they've caused no one harm.[40]

Another New York study released in April 2000 initiated by the staff of Senator Charles Schumer, found that most banks largely ignored African-American neighborhoods, even those with above average incomes, forcing many blacks to depend on "high cost and often abusive lenders." The study reviewed nearly 240,000 home loan applications made in New York City in 1998. The survey showed that African Americans are denied loan applications by banks at almost twice the rate of whites, even when they had the identical incomes. The actual rejection rate was 21.6 percent for African Americans, compared to only 11.4 percent for whites. But what's even more shocking is that even African Americans earning more than $60,000 annually have a higher rejection rate (20 percent) than whites who earn less than $40,000 (17 percent).

In order to buy homes, the majority of black New Yorkers are forced to turn to so-called "subprime lenders," financial firms that loan mortgage money at exorbitantly high interest rates. Such companies routinely force tens of thousands of homeowners into bankruptcy and foreclosure. Only nine percent of all mortgage loans in white areas in New York are provided by those subprime companies; in black neighborhoods, it is 55 percent of all home loans.[41]

Occupational segregation continues to persist at all income levels, and African Americans still frequently find themselves to be the first fired during periods of economic recession. During the 1990-1991 recession, according to the Wall Street Journal, a significant number of major corporations cut blacks' jobs at much higher rates than those of white employees. For example, J.P. Morgan, in which blacks represented 16.6 percent of its labor force in 1990, responded to the recession, in part, by relocating its clerical and data processing operations from New York City to Delaware. Black employees consequently suffered 29.6 percent of the total jobs lost. Coca Cola Enterprises, headquartered in predominantly black Atlanta, had a labor force that was 17.9 percent black in 1990. When the company decided to cut its blue-collar workforce, African Americans were disproportionately hit. Over 42 percent of all Coca Cola employees losing their jobs in 1990-1991 were African American. Sears, a corporation which in 1990 had a black workforce of 15.9 percent, made the decision to shut down their distribution centers in central cities, and to reduce its clerical staff. As a result, 54.3 percent of all Sears employees who lost their jobs in the 1990-1991 recession were black, nearly 3.5 times the rate of whites' job loss. The corporations that made these decisions would vigorously contest the suggestion that these actions were in any way "racist." The elimination of jobs in central cities, for example, was done to increase competitiveness and profitability. African-

American workers frequently had less job seniority, and were particularly vulnerable to layoffs. In any case, no racial intent could be proven: "No harm, no foul."[42]

Throughout the long experience of black people in the United States, there have been a series of racial domains or systems of structural racism, each with its own peculiar characteristics, but all maintained to ensure the hegemony of white over nonwhite. In each of these racial domains, African Americans and other Americans who opposed racial inequality fashioned tools of resistance, building new protest organizations and strategies to challenge the institutions that oppressed them. The concept behind this activity was the belief in human fairness, and the effort to destroy their continuing status of the Other in their own country. Although the features and character of twenty-first century structural racism have been reconfigured again in basic ways, the lessons of the racial past should not be forgotten in our own time. Social transformation along the contemporary boundaries of color and class will require new kinds of strategies, new approaches and new thinking. We must assist the development of community-based initiatives that have the capacity to educate and mobilize those who suffer most from racial oppression. Through this effort, we may make an important contribution toward the reconfiguration of American democracy itself, which could conceivably, one day, include all of us.

Notes

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3. W.E.B. Du Bois, Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), p. 128. Reprinted in 1975 by the Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited.

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19. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 45-47. Massey and Denton argue that residential segregation plays a "special role . . . in enabling all other forms of racial oppression. Residential segregation is the institutional apparatus that supports other racially discriminatory processes and binds them together into a coherent and uniquely effective form of racial subordination." (p. 8)

20. Ibid., pp. 14-15.

21. Stephen Grant Meyer, As Long As They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 178-181.

22. Ibid., p. 186.

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24. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Social Significance of These Three Cases," lecture delivered at Yale University Law School, January 11, 1951, reprinted in Herbert Aptheker, ed., Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961, by W.E.B. Du Bois (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), pp. 276-283.

25. See Marable, How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, p. 158.

26. Lieberman, Shifting The Color Line, p. 231.

27. Randall Kennedy, Race, Crime, and the Law, p. 115.

28. See Marable, How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, p. 124.

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33. See the series of articles on New York State prisons published in the Albany Times Union, March 26, 2000, including Paul Grondahl, "Sensible control or senseless cruelty?"; Graph, "In the Box: Special Housing Unit or Supermax prison beds across the U.S." (1998); "A Violation of Human Rights"; and "Walls and rules define life in The Box."

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