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Structural Racism and American Democracy

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

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Structural Racism and American Democracy: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

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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.