Structural Racism and American Democracy

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

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I.

A century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African-American scholar and cofounder 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 vantage point 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. Although laws have changed regarding the treatment of racialized minorities over the years, the deep structure of white prejudice, power, and privilege that has formed the undemocratic foun-

dation of most human interactions has not fundamentally been altered. For American democracy finally to become a reality for all 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 that 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,

Sense of Tranquility. Photo by Phillippe Cheng

aries of color have been seemingly permanent barriers to economic development and 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 that 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 American. Does this nation possess the political

constantly changing relationship. Some groups that are defined as an "inferior race" in American society at a certain historical moment may successfully escape racialization and become part of the privileged majority, the "whites." Other groups, especially those of African, Latino, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Asian descent, have found the path for group socioeconomic mobility far more difficult. The unequal bound- 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 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 in 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 of all racialized groups and social classes in decisionmaking processes, 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 Gunnar 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 only an American problem. In August–September 2001, 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. The Conference Against Racism is the culmination of many years of 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 antiracist activities, both in 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; 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 which 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 compromised by his own misconduct in public office, persuaded members of the administration to move more cautiously. Perhaps it was the fear that any well-publicized discourse about the continuing burden of racial oppression in American life would have generated 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 focused 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, viewed, in different ways, 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 any other part of the world."[3] With

plained, 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 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 and 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 govern-

ment, 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 through individual initiative and sacrifice all citizens could 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 same 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 under 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, and 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 the 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, Gunnar

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 Gardner, 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 those 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 dis-

crimination, 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, and 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 created 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 deteriorated rapidly 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 confining 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 an 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 from that of Asian Americans and Latinos, who could for the most part escape residential segregation by enhancing their incomes 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 number 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] Race subsequently "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.[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 the 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 for the purpose not of rehabilitation, but of 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, on 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 nonviolent offenders, and many of these had been 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, they represented 83 percent of all state prisoners by 1999, 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 lifetimes.[31]

The latest innovation in American corrections is termed "special housing units" (SHU), 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 cell-blocks are electronically monitored, prefabricated structures of concrete and steel, about 14 feet long and 8 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 of "exercise time" each day in a small concrete balcony, surrounded by heavy security wire, directly connected to 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 aver-

ages 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? Between 1980 and 2000, the combined expenditures of federal, state, and local governments on police have increased about 400 percent, according to criminal justice researcher David Barlow at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. 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 rationalizes 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 and 46 percent of all those tried in adult criminal courts, as well as 58 percent of all juveniles who are warehoused in adult prisons. In practical terms, this means that young African Americans who are arrested and charged with a crime are more than six times more likely to be assigned to prison than white youth offenders. Among young people who have never been to prison before, African Americans are nine times more likely than whites to be sentenced to juvenile prisons. Of 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 over two million Americans currently incarcerated, and while African Americans and Latinos comprise the majority of that population, the reality of racism should not obscure 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 full-time jobs. Seventy percent of all prisoners earned less than a $15,000 annual income in the year prior to their arrests, 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 1998 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 and $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 over-represented 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 vantage point 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 pro-

fessionals 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: that through individual initiative and personal responsibility success and upward mobility are possible, and that through the acquisition of wealth and private property the residual effects 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 reflects 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 than whites owing 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 vantage point 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 harm.[40]

Another New York study, released in April 2000 and 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. Mor-

gan, 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 its 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 their efforts 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

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published originally in 1903 (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 9.
2. See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Pantheon, 1944).
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.
4. Ion Diaconu, "The Definitions of Racial Discrimination," Paper prepared for the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on Human Rights, United Nations, February 26, 1999.
5. Ibid.
6. Etienne Balibar, "Paradoxes of Universality," in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 283–294. Quotations from p. 284.
7. Ibid., p. 284.
8. Ibid., p. 286.
9. Ibid., p. 287.
10. See Manning Marable, "The Future of the Cold War," in Leon Wofsy, ed., *Before the Point of No Return* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), pp. 120–125.
11. Randall Kennedy, *Race, Crime, and the Law* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), pp. 7, 14.
12. Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting The Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 231.
13. Roger B. Taney, "Opinion on Dred Scott v. Sandford," reprinted in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform and Renewal, An African American Anthology*

(Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 92–95.

14. Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*, Updated Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2000), p. 118.

15. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, Vol. 2 (New York: Pantheon, 1944), pp. 98, 100.

16. Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 297–301.

17. Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 153.

18. 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)

19. Ibid., pp. 14–15.

20. 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.

21. Ibid., p. 186.

22. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, p. 88.

23. 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.

24. See Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, p. 158.

25. Lieberman, *Shifting The Color Line*, p. 231.

26. Randall Kennedy, *Race, Crime, and the Law*, p. 115.

27. See Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, p. 124.

28. See "Following the Dollars: Where New York State Spends Its Prison Moneys," a policy paper prepared by the City Project, New York, March, 2000.

29. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990*, Second Revised Edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), p. 193.

30. Ibid., p. 196.

31. See the published report, *Conference Summary and Action Plan—Money, Education, and Prisons: Standing at the Crossroads*, produced by the Milwaukee Money, Education and Prisons Project sponsored by the Benedict Center at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, December 2–4, 1999.

32. 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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34. See *Conference Summary and Action Plan—Money, Education, and Prisons*.

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37. See "Juvenile Justice Called Unequal in a Report," *New York Times*, April 25, 2000.

38. Gary Delgado, "Racing the Welfare Debate," *Colorlines*, Vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 13–17.

39. Lawrence D. Bobo, "Mapping Racial Attitudes at the Century's End: Has the Color Line Vanished or Merely Reconfigured?" Unpublished paper prepared for the Aspen Institute, November 12, 1998.

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