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1

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

AMERICAN race relations have changed dramatically since this book was originally published in 1977. A number of important new sociological cards have been dealt to the American people during the intervening fifteen years:

"Hate" crimes have increased. Not only in Bensonhurst and Howard Beach, New York, or Forsythe County, Georgia, and Castro Valley, California, but also on major American university campuses. "In the last three years," one reporter observes, "there have been episodes of racist graffiti, jokes, anonymous hate notes or brawls at 175 campuses, including top private schools like Smith College, Brown University and Colby College as well as big public universities like Michigan and Wisconsin" (Berger, 1989). Racism in the 1980s has been much more malevolent and overt than it was in the 1970s.

A significant black middle class has emerged. Largely as a result of 1960s civil rights activities, economic well-being was achieved by a sizeable portion of the black community throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By 1981, the proportion of black Americans who enjoyed an income that supports a middle-class life-style exceeded 40 percent (Business-Higher Education Forum, 1990: 22).[1] As a consequence, some sociologists (Wilson, 1987) argue that class forces and economic factors are more important variables than white racism for explaining the social location of African Americans. The significance of racism, according to this view, has declined in the last two decades.

1 The most conservative estimate (Landry, 1987), places the proportion of blacks in the middle class at 37.8% in 1981; the most optimistic (Smith and Welch, 1984), at 68%. For a comparison of the two estimates, see Business-Higher Education Forum (1990: 21–4).

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New scholarship has been produced; the sociology of racism has become more sophisticated. Many sociologists now locate the situation of African Americans in an institutional rather than a psychological context, and much less energy is devoted to analyzing racial prejudice among whites. Instead, the focus is on culture, ideology, and discursive strategies. Racial issues are therefore grounded in a more complicated intellectual environment.

Additional political issues have erupted. In the 1970s, racial controversies were centered around "black power," busing, and affirmative action. Although affirmative action is still controversial, new disagreements have emerged over issues such as "multiculturalism" and "diversity."

Perhaps the most dramatic change has taken longest to register. Once recognized, however, it is obviously quite profound: The very meaning of racism has been transformed.[2] Racism used to be a rather hard-edged, specific concept. In the American context, it referred to an ideology that explicitly postulated the superiority of Europeans – who defined themselves as "white" – over Africans, Asians, "indigenous" North and South Americans, and sometimes eastern and southern Europeans as well.[3] It also referred to a set of practices that assumed the inherent, and biological inferiority of non-northern Europeans and people of color.

In contrast, the meaning of racism is currently being disputed. Some sociologists (Blauner, 1992; Miles, 1989) say the concept has been "inflated," and one of them (Miles, 1989: 52) writes that this book has contributed to that conceptual inflation. The word racism is also presently used in conflicting and apparently contradictory ways. In 1988, for example, liberal Democrats accused conservative Republicans of being racist for using campaign materials that insinuated a connection between race, crime, and indulgent social policy. Three years later, a conservative black Republican nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court returned the charge. Although not specifically charging them with "racism," he accused white senators of waging a "high tech lynching" when sexual

2 This insight is based on numerous discussions with Professor Michael K. Brown.

3 For a discussion of racism directed at eastern and southern Europeans in the United States see: Higham (1955).

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harassment charges were leveled against him on national television. Like the trump card in a poker hand, then, racism has become a powerful political card. And that card is played when it works to one's advantage.[4]

Many Americans interpret these changes to mean that racism is no longer a useful sociological concept. In their view, racism does not explain the differential experience of blacks and whites in America. On both the left and the right, theoretically elegant and politically fashionable explanations for persistent joblessness among black Americans now invoke "nonracial" notions like "economic dislocation," "moral character," "victim focused identity," or "impersonal economic shifts." Moreover, people who still attribute differences in the treatment of races to racism, according to William Wilson, are using a term that covers up "lack of information or knowledge of complex issues" (Wilson, 1987: 12). Whites who analyze racism as a central feature of America's existence are, in Bob Blauner's new view, race-conscious "extremists" (1992: 57). And, in not-so-polite company, many white Americans routinely dismiss allegations of racism as so much whining and excuse making by black people who are either unwilling or unable to take advantage of available opportunities.

Scholars who challenge the conceptual utility of racism typically do so for one of two reasons. Either they reduce racism to prejudice (Patterson, 1989; Wilson, 1987), and then correctly observe that the problems experienced by African Americans are not explained by ill will; or, they note how the word has been confounded with ethnicity (Blauner, 1992; Miles, 1989), and then correctly conclude that, when this happens, racism is not a terribly useful concept.

Without denying that the meaning of racism has clearly changed since this work was first published, or that the concept has obviously become a contested political weapon, I think the idea of racism is still useful and analytically powerful *when used along the lines proposed in the first*

4 Making a pun out of an American Express commercial, one black disc jockey in Chicago was heard to say during the Hill-Thomas hearings (October 1991): "The race card: Never leave home without one."

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edition of this book: That is, when racism is analyzed as culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages that are based on race. Racism is not simply bigotry or prejudice; and it should not be confused with ethnic hostilities. Although specific expressions of racism clearly change (Barbara Fields is correct: Racial attitudes are "promiscuous critters" [1982: 155]), sociologically speaking the analytic features of the concept stay the same. Regardless of its historically specific manifestations, racism today remains essentially what it has always been: a defense of racial privilege.

Two essential features of American race relations have *not* changed since 1977. One is that numerous contemporary sources of disadvantage and advantage in American society are still related specifically to race. They cannot be explained away with the nonracial concepts proposed by William J. Wilson or Shelby Steele. Theories of economic dislocation (Wilson) or victim focused identity (Steele, 1989) do not adequately explain one's location in the social organization of racial advantage. Race is still a deadly serious category in America; how one is designated racially profoundly affects the experience of being an American. Besides, as I argued in the first edition, prejudice is *not* what makes race such a salient category. Rather, race is important because white Americans continue to experience advantages based on their position in the American racial hierarchy. The issues that divide black and white people today are, therefore, what they were when this book was originally published: "grounded in real and material conditions" (Wellman, 1977: 37).[5] Thus, a concept is still needed to explain this situation, one that goes beyond prejudice, but does not steer the analysis to explanations based exclusively on class, moral character, or ideology. Racism remains that concept.[6]

5 Although this book focuses on the issues dividing black and white Americans, the analysis is applicable to relationships between white Americans and other peoples of color. The differences and relations between European Americans and Asian, Latino, or Native Americans are also rooted in the organization of racial advantage.

6 Reemphasizing "discrimination," as Blauner suggests (1992: 60), will not work. The concept of discrimination is too limited. To prove discrimination, one needs to demonstrate conscious actors operating with intentionality. This, however, ignores all the unintentional and unconscious activities that are so crucial to the organization and justification of racial advantage in modern society.

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The other continuity is that even though the sociology of racism has become more sophisticated in the last decade, contemporary sociological theorizing continues to minimize the structural impact of racism on American life. Racism is either downplayed, and structural features such as class are emphasized exclusively; or, the ideological elements of racism are analyzed as autonomous variables, and the organization of advantage is ignored. In each instance, however, the account fails to do what this book called for 15 years ago: connect the cultural and structural components of racism.

CONTINUING THEORETICAL TROUBLES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RACISM

The sociology of racism has changed markedly since the first edition was published. Racism is no longer reduced to its psychological components; racists are not typically portrayed as Archie Bunker-like caricatures.[7] Thus, it is no longer accurate to say, as I did in 1977, that "Rarely is a book written about racism that does not explain America's racial problems in terms of one sort of prejudice or another" (1977: 4).[8] Now, sociologists tend to locate racism institutionally, in history, economics, or culture.

The tendency among sociologists to move away from psychological accounts of racism has not, however, eliminated a serious theoretical problem that plagued the sociology of racism 15 years ago: Namely, how does one link together, in one conception, the structural elements of racial advantage with the ideological expressions of racism? Instead of bringing these two components under one conceptual roof, the sociology of racism has been divided into two camps, producing a theoretical bifurcation.[9]

7 This is not, however, true in popular culture. The racists in Spike Lee's movie, *Jungle Fever*, for example, are caricatures – they are Italian Archie Bunkers. Moreover, David Duke was demonized by politicians, editorialists, and cartoonists alike during the 1991 Louisiana gubernatorial campaign.

8 The tradition of analyzing racism as prejudice is, nevertheless, still alive and well. See for example, Edsall and Edsall (1991); Schuman et al. (1985); and Sears et al. (1979).

9 This bifurcation is similar to the division within marxist cultural studies between "culturalism" and "structuralism." See Stuart Hall (1980).

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William J. Wilson is the most prominent proponent of the "structuralist" path. Persistent joblessness and poverty among inner city black Americans, in his view, cannot be explained by "contemporary racism." Nor can the situation be understood by using more complex conceptions such as the "economic structure of racism." According to Wilson, "problems that fall heavily on much of the black population but require solutions that confront the broader issues of economic organization, are not made more understandable by associating them directly or indirectly with racism" (1987: 12). In his estimation, the term racism "weakens rather than enhances arguments concerning race . . ."; the concept "signals that the arguments typify worn-out themes . . ." (p. 12). It makes more sense, in Wilson's view, to analyze poverty among black Americans the same way it is analyzed for whites: by explaining joblessness in terms of social location, not race. Thus, poor black Americans, like poor white Americans, are poor because they are located in the low-wage sector of the economy, and because people in this structural location are "more adversely affected by impersonal economic shifts in advanced industrial society" (p. 12). Although Wilson acknowledges a "racial division of labor," and notes that it is reinforced by these shifts, he remains reluctant to "trot out" the concept of racism.

Wilson's thesis is a very important corrective against the tendency to psychologize, demonize, or otherwise trivialize the relevance of social location in the experience of being an American. But his aggressive theoretical posture oversteers in the structuralist direction. Because he completely eschews any concept of racism, Wilson leaves no conceptual space for explaining the different ways blacks and whites are treated even when they occupy common structural turf. His exclusive emphasis on economic organization, moreover, allows no theoretical room for exploring cultural or ideological expressions that might be related to and activated by the racial division of labor.

Wilson's analysis is echoed by an emerging chorus of social scientists who argue, as Alan Wolfe states the case, that "the most fateful and interesting developments have been taking place not between the races, but within one of them" (1992: 32).[10] White racism, according

10 Other proponents of this genre include Sleeper (1990); Lemann (1992).

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to these commentators, is a less than adequate explanation for urban poverty because (1) the black middle class has expanded in the last two decades, and (2) black poverty is to some degree attributable to culture and morality in the black community. Wolfe writes that it is necessary to construct a more realistic analysis, one that includes "some combination of the structural account and the moral account . . . (to) replace an emphasis on white racism as the explanation for what is taking place in the inner city" (1992: 37).

Like Wilson, his imitators minimize the continuing impact of racism on American life. Because they define racism narrowly, as an irrational, psychological problem manifested by misinformed white Americans, they are unable to connect urban poverty to more complicated and subtle understandings of the problem. They are also unable to explain the humiliating experiences suffered by middle class blacks at the hands of middle-class, liberal whites (Feagin, 1991). Like Wilson's, their structural account ignores critical questions and leaves others unanswered.

If the structuralist side of the theoretical divide minimizes the significance of race, then the "cultural" or "ideological" path maximizes it. Race is, in the estimation of two sociologists working in this tradition, "a *central axis* of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception" (Omi and Winant, 1986: 61, emphasis in the original). Thus, unlike the structuralist account, race and racism figure prominently in this approach; concepts such as racialization, racial formation, and racism are essential to it. The attempt to steer sociological theory back onto a road that recognizes the centrality of race, and away from an analytic path that reduces race to class, is an important effort. The problem, however, is that this tradition is a divided one, and the side that is typically practiced in, and most influential on, American sociology analyzes racism as an ideological construction that is based on misrepresentation or "false knowledge." Racism is not located in the organization of social advantage.[11]

11 Some sociologists working in this tradition do acknowledge reciprocity between "micro-" and "macro-social" levels in the "racial order" (Omi and Winant, 1986). But that relationship is not crucial to, and is never developed in, their analysis of racial formation.

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Rather, the focus is on meaning systems, categories, and beliefs independent of institutions that generate privilege.[12]

Robert Miles's perspective is typical of the first approach. He wants to restrict the concept of racism only to "what can broadly be called an ideology" (1989: 3). He objects when it is used to analyze "practices, procedures and outcomes." Racism, in Miles's view, is "discourse"; it is "talk." In a word, it is "ideology." And that is all it is. Racism works, in Miles's terms, through a "process of signification."[13]

Were Miles to analyze this process in relationship to the organization of racial advantage, then the sociology of racism would be well served. But that is not his approach. Because Miles intends to avoid what he calls conceptual "inflation," he provides no analysis of racial practices, procedures, and outcomes. Instead, racism is restricted to ideology: an ideology, moreover, that is neither associated with group position, nor located socially. If Miles were to analyze the nuances of this ideology, suggest how it is used, and to what advantage, that might also benefit the sociology of racism. But Miles's conception of ideology is much too traditional to do that. The system of categorization to which he refers is timeless; it is very traditional racism, based on phenotypical and/or genetic characteristics. Thus, instead of updating racist ideology, and indicating how it is currently used, Miles simply wants to debunk it.[14]

Omi and Winant make a much more complicated and ambitious contribution. Doubtful of formulations that reduce race to mere mani-

12 Although the other side does connect ideology to social location as well as discursive strategies and routine practices essential to the construction of hierarchy, it is traditionally used by historians, literary, cultural, and film critics, feminist and communications theorists, and psychoanalysts. Until quite recently, this approach was practiced mainly in England and Europe. American sociologists of racism largely ignored it. More on this perspective momentarily.

13 This concept refers to the basis upon which a hierarchy of groups is created and criteria are established for including and excluding groups in the process of allocating resources and services.

14 His purpose, in his words, is to demonstrate that racist ideology is just like any other "discourse" that "represents human beings and the social relations between human beings, in a distorted and misleading manner" (p. 42). Miles's conception of ideology overlaps with Kwame Appiah's. In Appiah's words, ideology is "systematically distorted rationality" (1990: 8).

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festations of social relationships that are presumed to be more fundamental, they put race at the core of American politics and social history. Their theory of racial formation suggests that the state shapes and is shaped by America's "racial contours." Through a process of "racialization," they argue, the state has become a "racial state"; racial meanings and politics have changed profoundly since the 1960s and 1970s.

Were Omi and Winant to deliver on their promise to link micro with macro levels of social relations, and political economy with consciousness, the current theoretical bifurcation dividing sociologists might be transcended. Unfortunately, however, the promise is not kept. Although their analysis is considerably more sophisticated than Miles's, they locate race where he does: in politics, ideology, and paradigms. The costs of being black and the benefits of being white do not figure in their theory. Racial formation is not analyzed in relation to racial advantage. Reading Omi and Winant, like numerous other sociologists who explain race ideologically, one would think that struggles over scarce resources ended in the 1960s, and that the subsequent problem has been to settle linguistic questions and get the discourse straightened out. They provide no serious analysis of the contemporary structure of racial advantage and how it might be connected to the ways in which people talk about race.[15]

Instead, their account is restricted to ideology and culture. Racialization, in their terms, is "an ideological process" (p. 64); it emerges from struggles of "competing political projects and ideas. . . ." "Racial formation" is a theory of how racial "meanings" are created and contested. The "racial debate" they analyze is not a disagreement over advantage versus disadvantage. It is a dispute over "interpretations" of race. Their theory of a racial state does not focus on struggles over political participation; it analyzes ideology. Even when they speak of a "racial order," they ignore questions of hierarchy and advantage. Because the organization of racial advantage is not crucial to Omi and Winant's analysis, because "systems

15 Perhaps the most extreme expression of this position is Prager's (1982). Arguing for the "autonomy of cultural understandings," he writes that racism is "independent of social structure" (p. 104).

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of racial meanings" are not analyzed in relationship to the structure of scarce resources, they do not, as they promise, connect racial consciousness with political economy. Thus, rather than being an alternative to the theoretical bifurcation, their analysis reflects it.

Ironically, although *race* is central to the American experience in Omi and Winant's account, *racism is not*. Racial formation is a theory of racial meanings, not racial privilege. They analyze neither the social location occupied by European Americans, nor the benefits associated with that location. Conceptually speaking, then, racism is not a crucial element in their theoretical formulation. It is defined almost as an afterthought.[16]

Even though this side of the cultural approach moves the sociology of race considerably beyond the theoretical formulations criticized in the first edition of this book, it fails as a theory of racism. Because there is no analysis of the benefits generated by the organization of racial advantage, and because ideology is constructed as false knowledge and analyzed independently of social context, the *experience* of racial formation, the phenomenology of living in a racial state is ignored. Thus, when Omi and Winant analyze modern expressions of racism, they resurrect the ghost of false consciousness. In their view, racism exists because unsuspecting white Americans are being manipulated by neoconservatives who have "rearticulated" the meaning of racial equality. Instead of relating these rearticulations to the social location of the people expressing them, and indicating how these ideologies are culturally sanctioned defenses of racial advantage, they attribute neoconservatism to manipulation by rearticulation. And so they cannot explain the ways in which the idea of race is not simply a misconception or misunderstanding, but actually helps white Americans live with themselves in a society that professes equality while being organized along racial lines. Nor can they account for how ideologies that use the idea of race in culturally acceptable ways promote or justify white people's racial advantages.

16 And when they define racism, they do so quite conventionally, without any reference to structures of privilege: "By racism we mean those social practices which (explicitly or implicitly) attribute merits or allocate values to members of racially categorized groups, solely because of their race" (p. 172).

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