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Racial Formation in the United States

Third Edition

**MICHAEL OMI AND
HOWARD WINANT**

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The Theory of Racial Formation

Race is a way of “making up people.”¹ The very act of defining racial groups is a process fraught with confusion, contradiction, and unintended consequences. Concepts of race prove to be unreliable as supposed boundaries shift, slippages occur, realignments become evident, and new collectivities emerge. State-imposed classifications of race, for example, face continuing challenges by individuals and groups who seek to assert distinctive racial categories and identities. Historical shifts in scientific knowledge, in fields ranging from physical anthropology to the genomic sciences, fuel continuing debates about what race may or may not mean as an indicator of human variation. While such debates and reformulations regarding the concept of race initially occur in specific institutional arenas, public spaces, or academic fields, their consequences are often dramatic and reverberate broadly throughout society.

Race-making can also be understood as a process of “othering.” Defining groups of people as “other” is obviously not restricted to distinctions based on race. Gender, class, sexuality, religion, culture, language, nationality, and age, among other perceived distinctions, are frequently evoked to justify structures of inequality, differential treatment, subordinate status, and in some cases violent conflict and war. Classifying people as other, and making use of various perceived attributes in order to do so, is a universal phenomenon that also classifies (and works to amalgamate and homogenize) those who do the classifying (Blumer 1958). “Making up people” is both basic and ubiquitous. As social beings, we must categorize people so as to be able to “navigate” in the world—to discern quickly who may be friend or foe, to position and situate ourselves within prevailing social hierarchies, and to provide clues that guide our social interactions with the individuals and groups we encounter.

But while the act of categorizing people and assigning different attributes to such categories may be universal, the categories themselves are subject to enormous variation over historical time and space. The definitions, meanings, and overall coherence of prevailing social categories are always subject to multiple interpretations. No social category rises to the level of being understood as a fixed, objective, social fact.

One might imagine, for example, that the category of a person’s “age” (as measured in years) is an objective social category. But even this familiar concept’s meaning varies across time and space. In many societies where the elderly are venerated and highly valued as leaders and living repositories of wisdom, individuals tend to overstate their age in years. By contrast, people in the youth-oriented United States tend to understate how old they are. Processes of classification, including self-classification, are

reflective of specific social structures, cultural meanings and practices, and of broader power relations as well.

The definitions of specific categories are framed and contested from "above" and "below." The social identities of marginalized and subordinate groups, for example, are both imposed from above by dominant social groups and/or state institutions, and constituted from below by these groups themselves as expressions of self-identification and resistance to dominant forms of categorization. In any given historical moment, one can understand a social category's prevailing meaning, but such understandings can also be erroneous or transitory. They are often no more than the unstable and tentative result of the dynamic engagement between "elite" and "street" definitions and meanings.

Race as a Master Category

It is now widely accepted in most scholarly fields that race is a *social construction*. Simply stating that race is socially constructed, however, begs a number of important questions. How is race constructed? How and why do racial definitions and meanings change over time and place? And perhaps most important, what role does race play within the broader social system in which it is embedded?

With respect to this last question, we advance what may seem an audacious claim. We assert that in the United States, *race is a master category*—a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States. Obviously, some clarification is in order. We are not suggesting that race is a transcendent category—something that stands above or apart from class, gender, or other axes of inequality and difference. The literature on intersectionality has clearly demonstrated the mutual determination and co-constitution of the categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. It is not possible to understand the (il)logic of any form of social stratification, any practice of cultural marginalization, or any type of inequality or human variation, without appreciating the deep, complex, comingling, interpenetration of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In the cauldron of social life, these categories come together; they are profoundly transformed in the process.²

We hold these truths of intersectional analysis to be self-evident. But we also believe that race has played a unique role in the formation and historical development of the United States. Since the historical encounter of the hemispheres and the onset of transatlantic enslavement were the fundamental acts of race-making, since they launched a global and world-historical process of "making up people" that constituted the modern world, race has become the *template* of both difference and inequality. This is a world-historical claim, but here we develop it only in the context of the United States.

We suggest that the establishment and reproduction of different regimes of domination, inequality, and difference in the United States have consciously drawn

upon concepts of difference, hierarchy, and marginalization based on race. The genocidal policies and practices directed towards indigenous peoples in the conquest and settlement of the "new world," and towards African peoples in the organization of racial slavery, combined to form a template, a master frame, that has perniciously shaped the treatment and experiences of other subordinated groups as well. This template includes not only the technologies (economic, political, cultural) of exploitation, domination, and deracination; it also includes the technologies of resistance: self-activity (James et al., 1958); "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*," sisterhood, and abolition democracy (Du Bois 2007 [1935]).

Consider the questions of class and gender. Historically in the United States, race has provided a master category for understanding the definition of class and the patterns of class consciousness, mobilization, and organization. Class stratification in the United States has been profoundly affected by race and racism, and the reproduction of class inequalities is inextricably linked to the maintenance of white supremacy. Race has shaped the meaning of such concepts as work and worker, labor and employment, master and servant, supervisor and subordinate (Roediger 2007 [1991]). Race is a fundamental organizing principle of social stratification. It has influenced the definition of rights and privileges, the distribution of resources, and the ideologies and practices of subordination and oppression. The concept of race as a marker of difference has permeated all forms of social relations. It is a template for the processes of marginalization that continue to shape social structures as well as collective and individual psyches. Drawing upon social psychology and mind science research that explores mechanisms of "othering," John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian assert: "Without being identical, most of the forms of marginalization and stratification in society share a common set of heuristics and structure, which is patterned on race" (Powell and Menendian n.d.).

From conquest and slavery on, racial parallels and racial "crossings" have shaped gender relations. Women and slaves were at best lower-status humans, at worst not human at all. They were both subject to chattelization. Their labor was coerced and unremunerated; they were physically brutalized. Although there were, of course, very distinct and widely varied experiences of subordination among different classes of women and of blacks, the objectification of both groups was near-total. Repression of women's autonomy, intellect, and bodily integrity was obsessive and often violent (Beauvoir 1989; Federici 2004). Blacks, Indians, and women were afforded very little recognition: Their entry into the public sphere, corporeal integrity, and intellectual capacity was strenuously denied. In political and legal theory, the sexual contract and the racial contract have been extensively compared (Goldman 1911; Rubin 1975; Pateman 1988; Mills 1999).

The corporeal distinction between white men and the others over whom they ruled as patriarchs and masters, then, links race to gender, and people of color to women. Whether they were defined by their racial status (as enslaved or "free," black, Indian, *mestiz@*), or by the patriarchal family (as daughters, wives, mothers), they

were corporeally stigmatized, permanently rendered as “other than,” and the possessions of, the white men who ruled. As in the case of class distinctions, evolving gender distinctions coincided in important ways with racial ones. In part, this too was corporeal: Perhaps at the core of intersectionality practice, as well as theory, is the “mixed-race” category. Well, how does it come about that people can be “mixed”? What does the presence of mixed people mean for both white and male supremacy?

In short, the master category of race profoundly shaped gender oppression. It is fascinating that this pattern of combined political influence and political tension, which was established in the antebellum intersection between abolitionism and early feminism and reproduced during the struggle for women’s suffrage and against Jim Crow at the turn of the 20th century, was then reiterated again in the post-World War II years in “intersectional” alliance and conflict between the civil rights movement and “second-wave” feminism. To be sure, there were many “intersections” between the two patterns described here. The tense and ultimately ruptural relationship between “first-wave” feminism and the black freedom movement around the turn of the 20th century is perhaps the best-known example: The (white) women’s suffrage movement broke with its former black allies, abandoning black women (and black men too) in the process, as the Jim Crow system was institutionalized in the United States. Southern states’ ratification of the 19th Amendment was conditional on their continued denial of black voting rights. Such black women activists as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper, as well as many lesser-known figures, fiercely denounced this as a betrayal. Of course, it reflected the pervasive white racism of the epoch (see Crenshaw 1991; Cooper 1998; Collins 2008 [1999]; Davis 2011 [1983]).

While race is a template for the subordination and oppression of different social groups, we emphasize that it is also a template for resistance to many forms of marginalization and domination. The new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, for example—the women’s movement, the student movement, the anti-war movement, the gay liberation movement—were inspired by and consciously drew upon the black movement’s theoretical insights, strategies, and tactics to organize their specific constituencies, make political demands, and challenge existing practices of exclusion and subordination. These movement challenges underscore the dual-edged and dynamic qualities that inhere in the social category of race. These qualities are, once again, economic, political, and cultural technologies. They involve asserting previously stigmatized identities, “fusing” previously “serialized” groups (Sartre 2004), creating “commons” where resources can be shared. “Making up people” racially, then, has been “portable” across U.S. history. It has spread from one oppressed group to another and proved transferable to other marginalized identities, social cleavages, and political struggles.

Before we can consider and fully evaluate the notion of race as a master category of social organization in the United States, we need to think about how race itself is defined, what meanings are attached to it, and how it is deployed to create,

reproduce, or challenge racist structures. The process of race making, and its reverberations throughout the social order, is what we call *racial formation*. We define racial formation as *the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed*.

Our presentation of racial formation theory proceeds in several steps. First, we provide a concept of *racialization* to emphasize how the phenomic, the corporeal dimension of human bodies, acquires meaning in social life. How are corporeal differences among humans apprehended and given meaning? Next, we advance the concept of *racial projects* to capture the simultaneous and co-constitutive ways that racial meanings are translated into social structures and become racially signified. Then, we discuss the problem of *racism* in an attempt to specify under what conditions a racial project can be defined as *racist*. Finally, we discuss *racial politics*, the way society is racially organized and ruled. Here, we consider *racial despotism*, *racial democracy*, and *racial hegemony* as frameworks for racial rule and racial resistance. We suggest that in the early 21st century the hegemonic concept of race in U.S. society is that of “colorblindness.” The ideological hegemony of colorblindness, however, is extremely contradictory and shallow. It confronts widespread resistance and falls short of achieving the political stability that hegemonic projects are supposed to deliver. This chapter ends there; the post-World War II political trajectory of race is treated in detail in the chapters that follow.

Racialization

Race is often seen as a social category that is either objective or illusory. When viewed as an objective matter, race is usually understood as rooted in biological differences, ranging from such familiar phenomic markers as skin color, hair texture, or eye shape, to more obscure human variations occurring at the genetic or genomic levels. When viewed as an illusion, race is usually understood as an ideological construct, something that masks a more fundamental material distinction or axis of identity: our three paradigms of ethnicity, class, and nation typify such approaches. Thus race is often treated as a metonym or epiphenomenon of culture (in the ethnicity paradigm), inequality and stratification (in the class paradigm), or primordial peoplehood (in the nation paradigm).

On the “objective” side, race is often regarded as an *essence*, as something fixed and concrete. The three main racial classifications of humans once posed (and now largely rejected) by physical anthropology—Negroid, Caucasoid, and Mongoloid—are examples of such an essentialist perspective. Another example is “mixed-race” identity. To consider an individual or group as “multiracial” or mixed race presupposes the existence of clear, discernible, and discrete races that have subsequently been combined to create a hybrid, or perhaps mongrel, identity. Here race is functioning as a metonym for “species,” although that connection is generally not admitted in the present day.

While race is still popularly understood as essence, it has also been viewed as a mere *illusion*, especially in more recent accounts. As a purely ideological construct, race is considered to be unreal, a product of "false consciousness." As we have seen in our discussion of class paradigms of race, both orthodox (neoclassical) economics and orthodox Marxism viewed race this way. For the former, it was an irrational distraction from pure, market-based considerations of value in exchange; for the latter it was an ideological tool that capitalists (or sometimes privileged white workers) deployed to prevent the emergence of a unified working-class movement. In the current period, colorblind ideology—expressed, for example, in affirmative action debates—argues that any form of racial classification is itself inherently racist since race is not "real."

We are critical of both positions: race as essence and race as illusion. Race is not something rooted in nature, something that reflects clear and discrete variations in human identity. But race is also not an illusion. While it may not be "real" in a biological sense, race is indeed real as a social category with definite social consequences. The family, as a social concept, provides an intriguing analogy to grasp the "reality" of race:

We know that families take many forms ... Some family categories correspond to biological categories; others do not. Moreover, boundaries of family membership vary, depending on individual and institutional factors. Yet regardless of whether families correspond to biological definitions, social scientists study families and use membership in family categories in their study of other phenomena, such as well-being. Similarly, racial statuses, although not representing biological differences, are of sociological interest in their form, their changes, and their consequences.

(American Sociological Association 2003, 5)

We cannot dismiss race as a legitimate category of social analysis by simply stating that race is not real. With respect to race, the Thomases's sociological dictum is still in force: "It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct—if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, pp. 571–572).

One of our aims here is to disrupt and reorganize the rigid and antinomic framework of essence-versus-illusion in which race is theorized and debated. We understand race as an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, we advance the following definition: *Race is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.* Although the concept of race invokes seemingly biologically based human characteristics (so-called phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. Indeed, the categories employed to differentiate among human beings along racial lines reveal themselves,

upon serious examination, to be at best imprecise, and at worst completely arbitrary. They may be arbitrary, but they are not meaningless. Race is strategic; race does ideological and political work.

Despite the problematic nature of racial categorization, it should be apparent that there is a crucial and non-reducible *visual dimension* to the definition and understanding of racial categories. Bodies are visually read and narrated in ways that draw upon an ensemble of symbolic meanings and associations. Corporeal distinctions are common; they become essentialized. Perceived differences in skin color, physical build, hair texture, the structure of cheek bones, the shape of the nose, or the presence/absence of an epicanthic fold are understood as the manifestations of more profound differences that are situated *within* racially identified persons: differences in such qualities as intelligence, athletic ability, temperament, and sexuality, among other traits.

Through a complex process of selection, human physical characteristics ("real" or imagined) become the basis to justify or reinforce social differentiation. Conscious or unconscious, deeply ingrained or reinvented, the making of race, the "othering" of social groups by means of the invocation of physical distinctions, is a key component of modern societies. "Making up people," once again. This process of selection, of imparting social and symbolic meaning to perceived phenotypical differences, is the core, constitutive element of what we term "racialization."

We define racialization as *the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.* Racialization occurs in large-scale and small-scale ways, macro- and micro-socially. In large-scale, even world-historical settings, racialization can be observed in the foundation and consolidation of the modern world-system: The conquest and settlement of the western hemisphere, the development of African slavery, and the rise of abolitionism, all involved profuse and profound extension of racial meanings into new social terrain. In smaller-scale settings as well, "making up people" or racial interpellation (a concept drawn from Althusser 2001 [1971]) also operates as a quotidian form of racialization: Racial profiling for example, may be understood as a form of racialization. Racial categories, and the meanings attached to them, are often constructed from pre-existing conceptual or discursive elements that have crystallized through the genealogies of competing religious, scientific, and political ideologies and projects. These are so to speak the raw materials of racialization.

To summarize thus far: Race is a concept, a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to these differences.

It is important to emphasize that once specific concepts of race are widely circulated and accepted as a social reality, racial difference is not dependent on visual observation alone. Legal scholar Osagie Obasogie makes the intriguing point that iterative social practices give rise to "visual" understandings of race, even among

those who cannot see. The respondents in his study, blind since birth, “see” race through interpersonal and institutional socializations and practices that shape their perceptions of what race is (Obasogie 2013). Thus race is neither self-evident nor obvious as an ocular phenomenon. Instead racialization depends on meanings and associations that permit phenotypic distinction among human bodies.

Some may argue that if the concept of race is so nebulous, so indeterminate, so flexible, and so susceptible to strategic manipulation by a range of political projects, why don’t we simply dispense with it? Can we not get “beyond” race? Can we not see it as an illusory thing? Don’t we see how much mischief has occurred in its name? These questions have been posed with tremendous frequency in both popular and academic discourse.³ An affirmative answer would of course present obvious practical difficulties: It is rather difficult to jettison widely held beliefs, beliefs which moreover are central to everyone’s identity and understanding of the social world. So the attempt to banish the concept as an archaism is at best counterintuitive. But a deeper difficulty, we believe, is inherent in the very formulation of this schema, in its way of posing race as a *problem*, a misconception left over from the past, a concept no longer relevant to a “post-racial” society.

A more effective starting point is the recognition that despite its uncertainties and contradictions, the concept of race continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world. The task for theory is to capture this situation and avoid both the utopian framework that sees race as an illusion we can somehow “get beyond,” as well as the essentialist formulation that sees race as something objective and fixed, a biological given. We should think of race as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it; we should see race as a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion. Such a perspective informs what we mean by racial formation.

Since racial formation is always historically situated, understandings of the meaning of race, and of the way race structures society, have changed enormously over time. We now turn to a historical survey of the race concept and the domains in which it has been defined and debated, consolidated and contested. Our effort here is to outline a genealogy of racialization that proceeds from religion to science to politics. Such a trajectory is by no means linear or progressive; rather it consists of the accretion of racialized experiences that are uneven and often incompatible. But it does allow us roughly to map and situate the development of the race concept, and to underscore its still unstable and ambiguous character.

The Evolution of Race Consciousness

How do perceived differences between groups of people become racialized? The identification of distinctive human groups, and their association with differences in physical appearance, goes back to prehistory, and can be found in the earliest documents—in the Bible, for example, or in Herodotus. But the emergence of a

modern conception of race does not occur until the rise of Europe and the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Even the hostility and suspicion with which Christian Europe viewed its two significant non-Christian “others”—the Muslims and the Jews—cannot be understood as more than a rehearsal for racial formation, since these antagonisms, for all their bloodletting and chauvinism, were always and everywhere religiously interpreted.⁴

It was only when European explorers reached the Western Hemisphere, when the oceanic seal separating the “old” and the “new” worlds was breached, that the distinctions and categorizations fundamental to a racialized social structure, and to a discourse of race, began to appear. The European explorers were the advance guard of merchant capitalism, which sought new openings for trade. What they found exceeded their wildest dreams, for never before and never again in human history has an opportunity for the appropriation of wealth, for predation or “primitive accumulation” remotely approached that presented by the “discovery.”⁵ Modern capitalism could not have come into being without this grand infusion of stolen wealth: a seemingly limitless reservoir of treasure—land, labor, lives by the millions—to do with as one willed.

But the Europeans also “discovered” people, people who looked and acted differently. These “natives” challenged their discoverers’ preexisting conceptions of the origins and possibilities of the human species (Jordan 2012 [1968], 3–43). The representation and interpretation of the meaning of the indigenous peoples’ existence became a crucial matter, one that would affect not only the outcome of conquest but the future of empire and thus the development of the modern world. For the “discovery” raised disturbing questions as to whether *all* could be considered part of the same “family of man,” and more practically, the extent to which native peoples could be exploited and enslaved. Thus “discovery,” conquest, and soon enough, enslavement, launched not only the headlong rush toward modernity, but also debates over human nature, philosophical anthropology. Such questions as: “What is a human being?” and “What is the nature of human difference?” were posed repeatedly as rulers and their advisers sought to organize and exercise control over their new dominions and new subjects.⁶

In practice, of course, the seizure of territories and goods, the introduction of slavery through the *encomienda* and other forms of coerced native labor, and then through the organization of the African slave trade—not to mention the practice of outright extermination—all presupposed a worldview which distinguished Europeans, as children of God and fully-fledged human beings, from “others.” Given the dimensions and the ineluctability of the European onslaught, given the conquerors’ determination to appropriate labor, land, and goods, and given the presence of an axiomatic and unquestioned Christianity among them, the ferocious division of society into Europeans and “others” soon coalesced. This was true despite the famous 16th-century theological and philosophical debates about the identity of indigenous peoples.⁷ In fact it ran right over whatever cautionary notes religious ethicists like las Casas, or

later Antonio Vieira (Blackburn 1997; Cohen 1998), William Wilberforce, or Henry Ward Beecher might have sounded.

Indeed, debates about the nature of the "others" reached their practical limits with a certain dispatch. Plainly, they would never touch the essential: Nothing, after all, would induce the Europeans to pack up and go home. The "discovery" signaled a break from the previous proto-racial awareness by which Europe had contemplated its "others" in a relatively disorganized fashion. The "conquest of America" was not simply an epochal historical event—however unparalleled in importance. It was also the advent of a consolidated social structure of exploitation, appropriation, domination, and signification. Its representation, first in religious terms, but later in scientific and political ones, initiated modern racial awareness. It was the inauguration of racialization on a world-historical scale.

The conquest, therefore, was the first—and given the dramatic nature of the case, perhaps the greatest—racial formation project. Together with African slavery it produced the master category of race, the racial template we have discussed. Its significance was by no means limited to the Western Hemisphere, for it also began the work of constituting Europe as the metropole, the center, of a series of empires which could take, as Marx would later write, "the globe for a theater" (Marx 1967, 751). This new imperial structure was represented as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, and implicated in this representation all the great European philosophies, literary traditions, and social theories of the modern age (Said 1993).

The immensity of this historical arc, the *longue durée* of racial formation from religion to science to politics, also underlies our claim that race provided a master concept for our understanding of oppression and resistance. But it is worth noting that right from the beginning of this historical journey, something like the social construction of race was *already* present. Before the white talking heads had debated the philosophical anthropology of Native Americans, or Africans,⁸ well before that in fact, *the immediate need to classify and categorize, to "make up people," had already surfaced*: Who was a European, a settler, a free man, and who was an *Indio*, an African, a slave? As a practical matter, something relatively devoid of theology or philosophy, the exercise of power required these distinctions.⁹ The main criteria available for this purpose were phenomic: the visual appearance of the bodies that had to be judged, sometimes under great pressure and with speed—for violence was omnipresent—as like or unlike, similar or different. This social (or more properly, this power-oriented, political) construction, this phenomic categorical imperative, would soon enough be reprocessed in the discourse available at the time: primarily and for a long time to come, theological discourse.

Only in later epochs would other ways of knowing supplant theological understandings: First scientific, and later, political accounts of race would be offered. Still the earlier religious and scientific frameworks, though losing influence, would never be fully eliminated, never really die. Thus do we arrive at our own time, our own knowledge of race, our own insistence on the social construction of race, with its

unstable combination of corporeal and performative elements, its inherent biosociality. We are still on this journey. We should be clear-sighted enough to recognize that these components, most centrally the political technology of the body, were there from the beginning. In short, just as the noise of the "big bang" still resonates through the universe, so the overdetermined construction of world "civilization" as a biosocial manifestation of European subjugation and the resistance of the rest of us still defines the race concept in the present.

From Religion to Science

After the initial depredations of conquest, religious justifications for racial difference gradually gave way to scientific ones. By the time of the Enlightenment, a general awareness of race was pervasive, and most of the great philosophers of Europe, such as Hegel, Kant, Voltaire, and Locke, were issuing virulently racist opinions (Count, ed. 1950; Eze, ed. 1997; Bernasconi and Lott, eds. 2000).

The problem posed by race during the late 18th century was markedly different than it had been in the earlier stages of conquest and enslavement. The social structures through which race operated were no longer primarily those of violent subjugation and plunder, nor of the establishment of thin beachheads of settlement on the edge of what had once seemed a limitless wilderness. Now the issues were much more complicated: nation-building, establishment of national economies in the world trading system, resistance to the arbitrary authority of monarchs, and the assertion of the "natural rights" of "man," including the right of revolution (Davis 1999 [1975]). In such a situation, racially organized exploitation in the form of slavery, the expansion of colonies, and the continuing expulsion of native peoples, was both necessary and newly difficult to justify.

Early Iterations of Scientific Racism: The invocation of scientific criteria to demonstrate the "natural" basis of racial hierarchy was both a logical consequence of the rise of this form of knowledge, and an attempt to provide a more subtle and nuanced account of human complexity in the new, "enlightened" age. Spurred on by the classificatory scheme of living organisms devised by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae* (1735), many scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dedicated themselves to the identification and ranking of variations in humankind. Race was conceived as a *biological* concept, a matter of species. Voltaire wrote that "The negro race is a species of men [sic] as different from ours ... as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds," and in a formulation echoing down from his century to our own, declared that

If their understanding is not of a different nature from ours ..., it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seem formed neither for the advantages nor the abuses of philosophy.

(Voltaire, in Gossett 1997 [1965], 45)

Jefferson, the preeminent exponent of the Enlightenment doctrine of "the rights of man" on North American shores, echoed these sentiments:

In general their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. ... [I]n memory they are equal to whites, in reason much inferior ... [and] in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.... I advance it therefore ... that the blacks, whether originally a different race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites. ... Will not a lover of natural history, then, one who views the gradations in all the animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of Man [sic] as distinct as nature has formed them?

(Jefferson 1984 [1785], 264–266, 270)

Such crackpot claims of species distinctiveness among humans justified the inequitable allocation of political and social rights, while still upholding the doctrine of "the rights of man." They rationalized the rapacious treatment to which the racial "others" were subjected, and even justified it as the unfortunate byproducts of development. You can still hear these arguments today: "Sure, these natives and slaves might be suffering now, but that is still preferable to being condemned to the eternal darkness of primitiveness and superstition...." The frequent resort to familial metaphors ("Our slaves are like our children; they must be taught to obey ..."), and the mad search for scientific justifications for unequal treatment—in phrenology and craniometry, for example, and then in evolution—all attest to the overarching importance of racial rule in the genealogy of the modern world.

Indeed the quest to obtain a precise scientific definition of race generated debates which continue to rage today, reiterated in the genomic, the criminological, and the humanistic approaches to race that we take for granted. Yet despite efforts to define race scientifically, ranging from Dr. Samuel Morton's studies of cranial capacity¹⁰ to contemporary attempts in the genomic sciences, the concept of race has defied biological precision.

In the mid-19th century, Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau drew upon the most respected scientific studies of his day to compose his four-volume *Essay on the Inequality of Races* (Biddiss 1970; Gobineau 1999 [1853–1855]; Todorov 1993). He not only greatly influenced the racial thinking of the period, but his themes would be echoed in the racist ideologies of the next one hundred years: beliefs that superior races produced superior cultures and that racial intermixtures resulted in the degradation of the superior racial stock. These ideas found expression, for instance, in the eugenics movement launched by Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, which had an immense impact on scientific and sociopolitical thought in Europe and the United States (Chase 1980; Kevles 1998; Graves 2001; Black 2012). In the wake of civil war and emancipation, and with immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as East Asia running high, the United States was particularly fertile ground for notions such as Social Darwinism and eugenics. Within

this context, racial difference became the rationale for discriminatory policies and practices of immigrant exclusion, naturalization rights, residential segregation, and forced sterilization.

Although black scholars like Kelly Miller, William Monroe Trotter, and W.E.B. Du Bois had questioned biologicistic racism at the end of the 19th century, and Chicago sociologists had cast doubt on evolution-based accounts of racial difference in the 1920s, it was not until after World War II that a sustained attack on the notion of race as a biological concept emerged and gained widespread acceptance. Only after eugenics had been discredited as the basis for racial science in Nazi Germany—eugenics had, of course, flourished in the United States as well—did scientific critiques of biologicistic racism become prominent. The 1950 UNESCO "Statement on Race"¹¹ boldly asserted that race was not a biological fact but a social myth. During this period, social and cultural conceptions of race became ascendant and it was optimistically assumed that the death knell of scientific racism had been rung. But had it?

Contemporary Reiterations of Scientific Racism: Over the past decades, the study of human variation in a number of fields has often defaulted to, and indeed relied upon, biological concepts of race in research on "population groups." Default to the race concept remains pervasive. After the launching of the Human Genome Project, for example, geneticists have engaged in vigorous debate about whether race is a meaningful and useful genetic concept. But they can't get rid of it. The notion of race as a discernible "biological category" has not been relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history.

Geneticist Neil Risch contends that genetic differences have arisen among people from different continents and uses the term "race" to categorize and cluster the human population into five major groups. This recognition of race, he contends, is important for understanding genetic susceptibility to certain diseases and receptivity to medical interventions such as drug treatments (Wade 2002). Indeed, the linkage between race and genetics finds its sharpest expression in the field of pharmacogenomics. The ultimate goal of pharmacogenomics is to be able to deliver the precise type of medication—and precise dose—to a patient based on their individual genome. Its goal is to tailor-make drugs to treat a specific condition. Because it is not yet practical to sequence each individual's genome in a quick and cost-effective manner, much less to do drug design on this level, race often serves as a "proxy" for determining how treatment with a specific drug might be targeted, if not at individuals, then at identifiable groups. And not surprisingly, race is the descriptor employed to select such groups (Lee 2005).

Consider the introduction of BiDil as the first "ethnic designer drug." Originally produced by the now defunct biotech firm NitroMed, BiDil was marketed to African Americans who suffer from congestive heart failure, despite serious doubts that arose in clinical trials about the distinctive racial claims being made for the drug. Yet it was released anyway, and prescribed for African Americans. Some medical researchers feared that BiDil sets a dangerous precedent by linking race and genetics in ways that

could distract from alternative ways of understanding the causes of a disease and the means to treat it (Kahn 2012).

The issue of race and genetics is a contentious one that finds expression in different sites and arenas.

- In 2010, PBS aired *Faces of America with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*, a four-episode documentary series that traced the ancestral roots of prominent celebrities through “genealogy and genetics.” An extension of earlier shows focused on famous African Americans, the series reflects a growing popular quest by individuals to find their “roots” through allegedly scientific means.
- In the field of forensics, Tony Frudakis of DNAPrint Genomics, a molecular biologist who came to fame in a Baton Rouge serial killer case in 2003, claims that he can determine a murderer’s race by analyzing his or her DNA (Wade 2003; Quan 2011; Obasogie 2013).
- DNA testing has increasingly been used by individuals and groups to claim Native American tribal membership. The Meskwaki Nation in Iowa utilized genetic-ancestry testing as a way to screen out individuals who sought tribal affiliation in order to share in the tribe’s casino profits. The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation of Connecticut, which controls the huge Foxwoods casino, requires DNA testing of newborns. Both the Cherokee and Seminole nations/tribes have been embroiled in conflicts with blacks who claim tribal ancestry and seek access to court-ordered monetary judgments. In these cases disputes have revolved around the “blood quantum” system of measuring Indian belonging (put in place by the Dawes Act of 1887), and have also involved tribal attitudes toward DNA testing of present-day claimants (Tallbear 2003; Indians.com 2005; Kaplan 2005; Koerner 2005).¹²

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has said: “We are living through an era of the ascendance of biology, and we have to be very careful. We will all be walking a fine line between using biology and allowing it to be abused” (Harmon 2007). There is indeed a fine line. Our individual sense of racial identity, the system of racial classification we employ, the meanings we ascribe to racial categories, and their use in social analysis and policy formation are rendered more complex, indeterminate, and muddy with the increasing re-biologization of race.

In psychology too, the cognitive presence of race, the immediacy of race that is seemingly rooted in perception rather than reasoning, leads researchers to think of it as an essence, something innate. Cognitive psychology and related fields have sought to uncover forms of racial animus that function “below the radar” of the conscious mind. Studies on the mechanisms and processes that affect perception, interpretation, memory, and decision-making have convincingly demonstrated that people harbor “implicit biases” and possess “racial schemas” that strongly influence perceptions and behaviors.¹³ Implicit biases can influence or shape various forms

of individual or institutional racial discrimination. Such discrimination, therefore, can occur in the absence of conscious intent, explicit prejudice, or racial animus. Thus the pervasiveness of racial meanings and their significance goes deep, very deep (Hirschfeld 1973 [1938]; Eberhardt and Fiske, eds. 1998; Goff et al. 2008; Marsh, Mendoza-Denton, and Smith, eds. 2010). Notions of race do not only inform our conscious understanding of the social world; they also permeate our unconscious minds—shaping our perceptions and attitudes, and influencing our actions.

For all its obvious importance, this approach also raises troubling questions: Are those cultural formations not themselves constructed? Are those “aggregate relations of power” impervious to challenge? Social constructions like race (or gender, or countless other human qualities) are of course composed of layered attributes that human beings *understand* as essences, but that does not make race, or gender an essence *in reality*, does it? (What would W.I. Thomas reply to that question?) If in practice race remains flexible and unstable, how does that instability affect the “racial schemas” that structure immediate perceptions? What is the essence of blackness or whiteness? Of maleness or femaleness (Butler 1993; Butler 2006 [1990]; Shelby 2007)?

There is a very strong temptation to derive racial distinctions, and perforce racism, from biological or evolutionary sources. This tendency is not limited to reactionary or conservative thinkers, but also affects progressive and egalitarian analysts, as we have seen in Douglas S. Massey’s “categorical” approach to inequality (discussed in Chapter 2). No doubt there is irony in contemporary attempts to provide a seemingly objective and scientific definition of race, and of the boundaries and contents (the essences) of racial categories as well. In previous historical periods, scientific racism provided the rationale for the subordination, if not elimination, of what were seen as undesirable, “mongrel,” and threatening racially identified groups. In the current period, biological/genetic definitions of race are mobilized to improve the treatment of diseases and minimize health disparities, to serve justice by providing “hard evidence” in criminal cases, to help individuals find their ancestral “roots,” and in the case of cognitive psychology, to reveal the deep mental structures of racism. While often motivated by good intentions, the premises behind these examples share an underlying logic with the racist frameworks of the historical past: a quest for some fundamental quality of racial identity, if not skin or hair, then genomic or limbic.

The recourse to “human nature,” to philosophical anthropology, to explain the supposed differences and “natural” biases entailed by race, has been a constant feature of human thought, especially in western civilization.¹⁴ It is tempting to extrapolate from implicit bias research: to conclude that race thinking is an innate part of human consciousness—something to which we are intrinsically and naturally predisposed. In clear disagreement with such views we insist that the “racial schemas” that structure immediate perceptions are also cultural formations; they may be deeply embedded as a result of centuries of reiteration in various forms. Yet they remain socially, not biologically, given. They remain subject to change. We are not biologically “hardwired” to be

racist. We reject any default to an essentialist and intrinsically unprovable notion of race. Yet resisting the temptation to racial biologism, whether conscious or unconscious, remains as difficult in science as it once was in religion.

From Science to Politics

Efforts to “re-biologize” race suggest that the understanding of race as a preeminently social concept remains an embattled and contested notion. While we acknowledge this ongoing tension, we suggest that conflicts and controversies about the meaning of race are principally framed on the terrain of politics. By privileging politics, we do not mean to suggest that race has been displaced as a concern of scientific inquiry, or for that matter as a theological question. Nor do we claim that struggles over cultural representation are less significant than political ones in shaping prevailing patterns of race and racism. We do argue, however, that race is now a preeminently political phenomenon.

Toward Social Construction: The historical trend towards recognizing race as a social and political construction has been slow and uneven. While critiques of race as a biological concept were more evident and ascendant in the early post-World War II period, there were previous historical precedents for understanding race as a social and political category. For example, Max Weber discounted biological explanations for racial conflict and instead highlighted the social and political factors that engendered it (Weber 2008, 385–387; Manasse 1947). Du Bois too wrestled with the conflict between a fully sociohistorical conception of race, and the more essentialized and deterministic vision he encountered as a student in Berlin.¹⁵ Pioneering cultural anthropologist Franz Boas rejected attempts to link racial characteristics to biological or evolutionist schemas, labeling as pseudoscientific any assumption of a continuum of “higher” and “lower” cultural groups, and allying with Du Bois quite early on (Boas 1969 [1945], 1962; Baker 1998).¹⁶

Du Bois and many prominent black scholars, for example, Alain Leroy Locke, philosopher and theorist of the Harlem Renaissance, had switched the focus of race studies definitively away from biologicistic accounts and towards sociopolitical explanatory frameworks, almost before modern sociology even existed in the United States. Black voices were ignored, however, until white exponents of socially based views of race like Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the “Chicago School” of sociology, reinvented a socially grounded account of it in the 1920s. Park combined the standard German training in sociology with a history of eight years as journalist and publicist for Booker T. Washington. After his substantial career at Chicago, Park’s last job was at Fisk University, the leading historically black college (Du Bois’s *alma mater* as well).¹⁷

Perhaps more important than these and subsequent intellectual efforts, however, were the political struggles of people of color themselves. Waged all around the globe under a variety of banners such as anti-colonialism and civil rights, these battles to challenge various structural and cultural racisms have been a major feature

of 20th-century politics. The racial horrors of the 20th century—colonial slaughter and apartheid, the genocide of the Holocaust, and the massive bloodlettings required to end these evils—have also indelibly marked the theme of race as a sociopolitical issue *par excellence*.

Racial Politics: Our notion of racial formation foregrounds the ongoing political contestation that takes place between the state and civil society—across the political spectrum—to define and redefine the very meaning of race. This is a good example of the way race operates across micro–macro linkages: The persistent and continuing controversies regarding state-based racial classification provide a particularly apt illustration of racial formation.

Over the last several centuries, the designation of racial categories by the state—the political dimensions of state assignment of racial identity—has provoked intense disputes in the United States. Who was considered “free” and who “unfree”? Who could be a naturalized citizen (Carbado 2005)? Who could marry whom? In this last regard, it is sobering to think that it was not until 1967 that all state anti-miscegenation laws were ruled unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia*. The state wields enormous power in defining what race is. Through its powers of racial classification, the state fundamentally shapes one’s social status, access to economic opportunities, political rights, and indeed one’s identity itself.

In 2003, former University of California Regent Ward Connerly introduced a measure popularly known as the Racial Privacy Initiative (Proposition 54) before California voters. Proposition 54 sought to amend the California State Constitution by enacting a ban on racial data collection by the state. Connerly (2003) asserted that relying on racial classification and maintaining race-based remedies to racial inequalities would only “give credence to the dangerous view held by many that ‘race’ is a fixed biological reality.”¹⁸

The discrepancies, gaps, and contradictions between state definitions and individual and collective racial identities are no more evident than in the racial and ethnic categories employed by the U.S. Census. Among others, the U.S. Census establishes categories based on nativity, citizenship status, age, household income, and marital status. None of these categories, however, has been subject to such intense scrutiny, vigorous debate, and political controversy as that of race.

The race questions on the U.S. Census have been shaped by the political and social agenda of the historical period in question. The first census in 1790 distinguished holders of the franchise, namely tax-paying white males, from the general population. The practice of slavery motivated changes in categorization such as grouping blacks into free and slave populations. Prior to the 1960s, census categories were utilized politically to disenfranchise and discriminate against groups defined as nonwhite, a practice that has diminished but not entirely ceased in the “post-civil rights” era. From restrictions on, naturalization rights to the setting of national quotas in the 1924 National Origins Immigration Act, census categories were routinely and strategically deployed to circumscribe the political, economic, and social rights of people

of color and immigrants. By the 1960s, the idea of race as a biological construct was widely discredited in academic and scientific circles, and the race question would have been excluded from the 1970 census had it not been for the passage of civil rights and equal opportunity legislation. The new laws required federal agencies to compile data, look for patterns of discrimination, and selectively redress them through various programs and initiatives. This made it necessary to continue to employ forms of racial classification and statistics (Prewitt 2013).

In 1977, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued Statistical Directive No. 15 that fostered the creation of "compatible, nonduplicated, exchangeable racial and ethnic data by Federal agencies." The directive defined the basic racial and ethnic categories to be utilized by the federal government for three reporting purposes: statistical, administrative, and civil rights compliance. The five standard categories were American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, White, and Hispanic (U.S. Office of Management and Budget 1994).

These racial categories are rife with inconsistencies and lack parallel construction. Only one category is specifically racial, only one is cultural, and only one relies on a notion of affiliation or community recognition. Directive No. 15 defines a black person as one who has his or her "origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa," but it does not define a white person with reference to any of the white racial groups of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East. Indeed "Black" is the only category that is defined with an explicit "racial" designator—one which is quite problematic. What, we might ask, are the "black racial groups of Africa"? Hispanics are not considered or classified as a "race," but as an "ethnic group." The Hispanic category is, in fact, the only "ethnicity" that the state is interested in explicitly identifying and classifying. The category is defined through a combined national/ethnic designator—a person of "Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin." In this definition, Hispanics can be of any race.¹⁹ The category of "American Indian or Alaskan Native" complicates matters further. To be counted as part of the group, individuals must not only trace their origins in any of the original peoples of North America, but they must also maintain "cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition." This is a condition that the state does not require of any of the other groups.

While originally narrowly conceived to provide consistent categories for use by federal agencies, Directive No. 15 had the unintended consequence of reshaping much of the discourse of race in the United States. These categories have become the *de facto* standard for state and local agencies, the private and nonprofit sectors, and the research community. Social scientists and policy analysts have widely adopted census directives since data is organized under these rubrics. The social and cultural impact of these categories is readily apparent. They inordinately shape both group identities and community-formation patterns. Largely in response to these categories, new organizations have emerged representing the interests of "Asian and Pacific Islanders" or "Hispanics" in a variety of forms from service providers to professional

caucuses. Census categories have played a pivotal role in the emergence and sustaining of panethnic forms of social organization and consciousness. The Census has become the primary site within the U.S. state where competing political claims for group recognition by race and ethnicity are advanced, and where classifications are established in response to statistical needs, administrative recordkeeping practices, and legal requirements. Racially identified groups realize the political value of racial categorization, along with the strategic deployment of "numbers," in highlighting inequalities, arguing for resources, and lobbying for specific redistricting plans, among other demands. Electoral districts, for example, are drawn on the basis of census data.

Despite attempts to achieve standardized and generally understood racial categories, all such forms of classification are fundamentally unstable. One problem is the persistent gap between state definitions and individual/group forms of self-identification. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over the last four Censuses (from 1980 to 2010) at least 40 percent of "Hispanics" failed to answer either the race question and/or the ethnicity question. Correspondingly, over 95 percent of individuals who mark the "Some Other Race" box were classified Hispanic by the Census. This reflects individual, group, and/or national differences in conceptualizing race. Immigrant groups who come from societies organized around different concepts of race and ethnicity often have difficulty navigating and situating themselves within U.S. racial categories.

Groups continually contest the existing system of racial classification. Arab Americans, currently classified as "white," have argued for a distinctive category to capture forms of discrimination exemplified by the hate crimes and profiling that have occurred as a result of the "War on Terror" and continuing political instability in the Middle East. Taiwanese Americans have been lobbying for a distinctive category as Taiwanese, separate from that of Chinese under the Asian or Pacific Islander category. In both these instances, racial and ethnic consciousness is being fueled in large part by geopolitical transformations that affect how groups see themselves as well as how they are viewed by others.

Multiracial Identity: The debate surrounding the establishment of a multiracial category in the U.S. Census illustrates how some groups contest the existing framework of racial classification, how other groups seek to preserve it, and how the power of the state is employed to adjudicate different racial claims.

For the past 100 years or so, the U.S. Census has assumed that each individual possessed a clear, singular, and monoracial identity. Earlier census enumeration schedules, by contrast, recognized "mixed race" individuals. The 1890 Census listed "mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon" along with "white, black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian." These mixed race categories eventually disappeared from the census, but the "one-drop rule" of racial descent and the imposition of an arbitrary monoracial identity on individuals of racially mixed parentage remained in place. The 1920 census stipulated that "any mixture of White and some other race was to be reported

according to the race of the person who was not White." In 1977, OMB Directive 15 stated that "[t]he category which most closely reflects the individual's recognition in his community should be used for purposes of reporting on persons who are of mixed racial and/or ethnic origins."

In an attempt to assert their multiracial heritage, some individuals ignored census instructions to "[f]ill ONE circle for the race that the person considers himself/herself to be," by marking two or more boxes. However, since the census scanners are designed to read only one marked box, these people were reclassified as monoracial, based on whichever box was marked more firmly. In addition, individuals specifying the "Other" category are routinely reassigned to one of the OMB's distinct racial categories based on the first race listed.

Beginning in the 1970s, various individuals and groups formally protested the notion of mutually exclusive racial categories embodied in the "single-race checkoff" policy. Much of the public pressure came from the parents of school-age multiracial children. In the public schools, a multiracial child is often faced with the dilemma of having to choose one race, and constantly risks being misclassified in this setting.

After several years of intense debate, the OMB's Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards rejected the proposal to add a separate multiracial category. Instead, in July 1997, the 30-agency task force recommended that Directive 15 be amended to permit multiracial Americans to "mark one or more" racial category when identifying themselves for the census and other government programs. At first, most of the major civil rights organizations, such as the Urban League and the National Council of La Raza, along with groups such as the National Coalition for an Accurate Count of Asians and Pacific Islanders, opposed a multiracial category. These groups feared a diminution in their numbers, and worried that a multiracial category would spur debates regarding the "protected status" of groups and individuals. According to various estimates, from 75 to 90 percent of those who checked the "black" box could potentially check a multiracial one if it were an option. Concerned about the possible reductions in group numbers, civil rights groups argued that existing federal civil rights laws and programs were based on exclusive membership in a defined racial/ethnic group. It would be difficult, if not impossible, from this angle, to assess the salience of multiraciality in relationship to these laws and programs. The "mark one or more" option was adopted in Census 2000.

Racial Projects

Race is a "crossroads" where social structure and cultural representation meet. Too often, the attempt is made to understand race simply or primarily in terms of only one of these two analytical dimensions. For example, efforts to explain racial inequality as a purely social structural phenomenon either neglect or are unable to account for the origins, patterning, and transformation of racial meanings, representations, and social identities. Conversely, many examinations of race as a system of signification,

identity, or cultural attribution fail adequately to articulate these phenomena with evolving social structures (such as segregation or stratification) and institutions (such as prisons, schools, or the labor market).

Race can never be merely a concept or idea, a representation or signification alone. Indeed race cannot be discussed, cannot even be *noticed*, without reference—however explicit or implicit—to social structure. To identify an individual or group racially is to locate them within a socially and historically demarcated set of demographic and cultural boundaries, state activities, "life-chances," and tropes of identity/difference/(in)equality. Race is both a social/historical structure and a set of accumulated signifiers that suffuse individual and collective identities, inform social practices, shape institutions and communities, demarcate social boundaries, and organize the distribution of resources. We cannot understand how racial representations set up patterns of residential segregation, for example, without considering how segregation reciprocally shapes and reinforces the meaning of race itself.

We conceive of racial formation processes as occurring through a linkage between structure and signification. *Racial projects* do both the ideological and the practical "work" of making these links and articulating the connection between them. *A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines.* Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning. Racial projects are attempts both to shape the ways in which social structures are racially signified and the ways that racial meanings are embedded in social structures.

Racial projects occur at varying scales, both large and small. Projects take shape not only at the macro-level of racial policy-making, state activity, and collective action, but also at the level of everyday experience and personal interaction. Both dominant and subordinate groups and individual actors, both institutions and persons, carry out racial projects. The imposition of restrictive state voting rights laws, organizing work for immigrants', prisoners', and community health rights in the ghetto or barrio are all examples of racial projects. Individuals' practices may be seen as racial projects as well: The cop who "stops and frisks" a young pedestrian, the student who joins a memorial march for the slain teenager Trayvon Martin, even the decision to wear dreadlocks, can all be understood as racial projects. Such projects should not, however, be simply regarded and analyzed as discrete, separate, and autonomous ideas and actions. Every racial project is both a reflection of and response to the broader patterning of race in the overall social system. In turn, every racial project attempts to reproduce, extend, subvert, or directly challenge that system.

Racial projects are not necessarily confined to particular domains. They can, for example, "jump" scale in their impact and significance. Projects framed at the local level, for example, can end up influencing national policies and initiatives. Correspondingly, projects at the national or even global level can be creatively and strategically

recast at regional and local levels. Projects “travel” as well. Consider how migration recasts concepts of race, racial meaning, and racial identity: Immigrants’ notions of race are often shaped in reference to, and in dialogue with, concepts of race in both their countries of origin and settlement. Thus migrants can maintain, adopt, and strategically utilize different concepts of race in transnational space (Kim 2008; Roth 2012).

At any given historical moment, racial projects compete and overlap, evincing varying capacity either to maintain or to challenge the prevailing racial system. A good example is the current debate over the relevance of “colorblind” ideology, policy, and practice; this provides a study of overlapping and competing racial projects. We discuss the hegemony of colorblindness in the concluding section of this book.

Racial projects link signification and structure not only in order to shape policy or exercise political influence, but also to organize our understandings of race as everyday “common sense.” To see racial projects operating at the level of everyday life, we have only to examine the many ways in which we “notice” race, often unconsciously.

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is. This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially “mixed” or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning.

Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure. Comments such as “Funny, you don’t look black” betray an underlying image of what black should look like. We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities. Phenotype and performativity should match up. Indeed we become disoriented and anxious when they do not. Encounters with the black person who can’t dance, the Asian American not proficient in math and science, or the Latin@ who can’t speak Spanish all momentarily confound our racial reading of the social world and how we navigate within it. The whole gamut of racial stereotypes testifies to the way a racialized social structure shapes racial experience and socializes racial meanings. Analysis of prevailing stereotypes reveals the always present, already active link between our view of the social structure—its demography, its laws, its customs, its threats—and our conception of what race means.

Conversely, the way we interpret our experience in racial terms shapes and reflects our relations to the institutions and organizations through which we are embedded in the social structure. Thus we expect racially coded human characteristics to explain social differences. “Making up people” once again. Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race. Such diverse questions as our confidence and trust in others (for example, salespeople, teachers, media figures, and neighbors), our sexual preferences and romantic images, our tastes in music, films, dance, or sports, and our very ways of talking, walking, eating, and dreaming become racially coded simply because we live in a society where racial awareness is so pervasive.

To summarize the argument so far: The theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected. This racial “subjection” is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus are we inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes “common sense”—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. A vast web of racial projects mediates between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other. The interaction and accumulation of these projects are the heart of the racial formation process.

Because of the pervasion of society by race, because of its operation over the *longue durée* as a master category of difference and inequality, it is not possible to represent race discursively without simultaneously locating it, explicitly or implicitly, in a social structural (and historical) context. Nor is it possible to organize, maintain, or transform social structures without simultaneously engaging, once more either explicitly or implicitly, in racial signification. Racial formation, therefore, is a *synthesis, a constantly reiterated outcome*, of the interaction of racial projects on a society-wide level. These projects are, of course, vastly different in scope and effect. They include large-scale public action, state activities, and interpretations of racial conditions in political, artistic, journalistic, or academic fora,²⁰ as well as the seemingly infinite number of racial judgments and practices, conscious and unconscious, that we carry out as part of our individual experience.

The concept of racial projects can be understood and applied across historical time to identify patterns in the *longue durée* of racial formation, both nationally and the entire modern world. At any particular historical moment, one racial project can be hegemonic while others are subservient, marginal, or oppositional to it. White supremacy is the obvious example of this: an evolving hegemonic racial project that has taken different forms from the colonial era to the present. In the chapters that follow, we utilize the concept of racial projects to examine the political trajectory of race over the past six decades in the United States.

But we are not done with racial formation yet. Before we get to the recent history of racial politics, and with the foregoing account of racial formation in mind, we must turn our attention to the problem of *racism*. Racial politics are necessarily deeply bound up with this topic. But race and racism are not the same thing. What is the relationship between them?

Racism

Magnus Hirschfeld, a German physician and sexologist of the Weimar era who was an early advocate of gay and transgender rights, initially gave currency to the term “racism.” Published posthumously, Hirschfeld’s book *Rassismus (Racism)* (1938) provided a

history, analysis, and critical refutation of Nazi racial doctrines. Since the 1930s, the concept of racism has undergone significant changes in scope, meaning, and application. As historian George Fredrickson observes, "Although commonly used, 'racism' has become a loaded and ambiguous term" (2002, 151). While ideological notions of race have been directly tied to practices ranging from social segregation, exclusion from political participation, restrictive access to economic opportunities and resources, and genocide, the precise definition and significance of *racism* has been subject to enormous debate.

Robert Miles (1989) has argued that the term "racism" has been conceptually "inflated" to the point where it has lost its precision. While the problem of conceptual inflation and its political implications are evident in an era of colorblindness, the term "racism" is also subject to conceptual deflation. That is, what is considered racist is often defined very narrowly, in ways that obscure rather than reveal the pervasiveness and persistence of racial inequality in the United States. For example, racism has been popularly and narrowly conceived as racial *hate*. The category of "hate crimes" has been introduced in many states as a specific offense with enhanced sentencing consequence, and many colleges and universities have instituted "hate speech" codes to regulate expression and behavior both inside and outside of the classroom. Dramatic acts of racial violence are given considerable play in the mass media, and are the subject of extensive condemnation by political elites. But as critical race scholar David Theo Goldberg (1997) has pointed out, the conceptual and political reduction of racism to hate both limits our understanding of racism and of the ways to challenge it. Racist acts are seen as "crimes of passion"—abnormal, unusual, and irrational deeds that we popularly consider offensive. Missing from such a narrow interpretation of racism are the ideologies, policies, and practices in a variety of institutional arenas that normalize and reproduce racial inequality and domination.

How should we understand racism today? We have argued that race has no fixed meaning, that it is constructed and transformed sociohistorically through the cumulative convergence and conflict of racial projects that reciprocally structure and signify race. Our emphasis on racial projects allows us to advance a definition of racism as well. A racial project can be defined as racist if it *creates or reproduces structures of domination based on racial significations and identities*.

Rather than envisioning a single, monolithic, and dominant racist project, we suggest that racist projects exist in a dense matrix, operating at varying scales, networked with each other in formally and informally organized ways, enveloping and penetrating contemporary social relations, institutions, identities, and experiences. Like other racial projects, racist projects too converge and conflict, accumulate and interact with one another.

Complex and embedded as this web of racist projects is—remember, projects both signify and structure relationships, practices, and institutions—it is not the whole story. Powerful as racism is, it does not exhaust race. It does not crowd out anti-racism or eliminate the emancipatory dimensions of racial identity, racial solidarity, or racially conscious agency, both individual and collective. Indeed race is so

profoundly a lived-in and lived-out part of both social structure and identity that it *exceeds and transcends* racism—thereby allowing for resistance to racism. Race, therefore, is *more* than racism; it is a fully-fledged "social fact" like sex/gender or class. From this perspective, race shapes racism as much as racism shapes race.

That said, a number of questions remain to be addressed. Our discussion has focused on racist projects, but are there also anti-racist projects? Can groups of color advance racist projects?

Are there anti-racist projects? On some level, this question answers itself. Millions of people in the United States (and elsewhere) have committed their actions, intellects, emotions, and in many cases their lives, to the cause of ending, or at least reducing, racism. Numerous individuals and groups continue to mobilize against racism. They seek to respond to racist attacks: assaults and murder, often by the police, on black and brown people, racial "steering" in housing and credit markets, racially biased sentencing practices in criminal courts . . . the list is seemingly endless. They act to resist institutionalized racist practices, such as "stop and frisk" policies targeting black and brown youth;²¹ to educate and organize against racism through media, research, legal and political action; and to disrupt and counter racist practices in everyday life. Continuing the argument advanced throughout this chapter, we define anti-racist projects as those that *undo or resist structures of domination based on racial significations and identities*.

Anti-racism has been the subject of seemingly endless discussion, especially through the rise and fall of the post-World War II political trajectory of race. It has become much more difficult to understand anti-racism since racism went "underground" at the end of the 1960s; since the racist practices and the meaning of racism have changed from "old school" explicit discourses and white supremacist actions like lynchings and cross-burnings. Instead, racism now takes more implicit, deniable, and often unconscious forms. Because the law continues to understand racism (racial discrimination) in the old way—as an explicit, intentional, *invidious* distinction based on race—legal remedies have been sharply curtailed.²² By restricting its understanding of discrimination in this way, the Supreme Court has permitted and tacitly encouraged denial and concealment of racist practices.

If racism is not merely a matter of explicit beliefs or attitudes—significations or identities, in our vocabulary—but also and necessarily involves the production and maintenance of social structures of domination, then the denial of invidious intent is clearly insufficient to undo it. The absence of invidious intent does little or nothing to unwind the social structures through which racism flourishes and is reproduced. In the "post-civil rights" era, racism has been largely—though not entirely, to be sure—detached from its perpetrators. In its most advanced forms, indeed, it has no perpetrators; it is a nearly invisible, taken-for granted, common-sense feature of everyday life and social structure. This is the situation that has allowed U.S. courts and mainstream political discourse to block race-conscious reparative measures such as affirmative action, to proclaim the United States a "colorblind" society, and to

stigmatize anti-racist activists and intellectuals—legal practitioners, community organizations, school systems and universities, and other individuals and institutions seeking to overturn structures of racial exclusion and discrimination—as “playing the race card,” as the “real racists.”

Can Groups of Color Advance Racist Projects? Some scholars and activists have defined racism as “prejudice plus power.”²³ Using this formula, they argue that people of color can’t be racist since they don’t have power. But things are not that simple. “Power” cannot be reified as a thing that some possess and others do not; instead it constitutes a relational field. Furthermore, unless one is prepared to argue that there has been no transformation of the U.S. racial order in the past several decades, it is difficult to contend that groups of color have attained *no* power or influence. To do so risks dismissing the political agency of people of color.²⁴

Racialized groups are positioned in unequal ways in a racially stratified society. Racial hierarchy pervades the contemporary United States; that hierarchy is preponderantly white supremacist, but it is not always that way. There are some exceptions, specific urban areas where groups of color have achieved local power, for example, in the administration of social services and distribution of economic resources. In cities like Oakland and Miami, this has led to conflicts between blacks and Latin@s over educational programs, minority business opportunities, and political power, with dramatically different results depending on which group held relative power. In these cases, some groups of color are promoting racial projects that subordinate other groups of color. While such exceptions do not negate the overarching reality of white supremacy, they do suggest that differences in racial power persist among groups of color. Inter-group racial conflict is not unidimensional; it is not solely whites vs. people of color, though whiteness still rules, OK?

Racial Politics: Despotism, Democracy, and Hegemony

For most of its existence, both as a European colony and, as an independent nation, the United States was a *racial despotism*. In many ways it remains racially despotic today. Progress towards political standing and the empowerment of people of color, for example, has been painfully slow and highly uneven. It took over 160 years, from the passage of the Naturalization Law of 1790 to the 1952 McCarran–Walter Act, to abolish racial restrictions regarding naturalization (well, not totally).²⁵ After the civil war, there was the brief democratic experiment of Reconstruction that terminated ignominiously in 1877. In its wake there followed almost a century of legally sanctioned segregation and wholesale denial of the vote. While the civil rights movement and its allies made significant strides towards enhancing formal political rights, obstacles to effective political participation have remained stubbornly persistent, as recent legal decisions jeopardizing voting rights have revealed (U.S. Supreme Court 2013).

It is important, therefore, to recognize that in many respects, racial despotism is the norm against which all U.S. politics must be measured. Centuries of U.S.

racial despotism have had three important and dramatic consequences. First, they defined “American” identity as white: as the negation of racialized “otherness”—initially African and indigenous, later Latin American and Asian as well (Rogin 1991; Morrison 1993; Drinnon 1997). This negation took shape in both law and custom, in public institutions and in forms of cultural representation. It became the archetype of racial domination in the United States. It melded with the conquest and slavery as the “master” racial project.

Second, racial despotism organized—albeit sometimes in an incoherent and contradictory fashion—the “color line,” rendering racial division the fundamental schism in U.S. society. The despotism of the color line also demanded an ongoing and intensive policing of racial boundaries, an ongoing racialization effort that ran not only between various groups and people, but also *through* them. In other words, racial despotism did not only elaborate, articulate, and drive racial divisions institutionally; it also hammered them into our psyches, causing untold fear and suffering, and extending, up to the moment in which you are reading this, the racial obsessions and oppressions of the conquest and slavery periods.

Third, racial despotism consolidated oppositional racial consciousness and organization. Originally framed by slave revolts and *marronage*,²⁶ by indigenous resistance, and by nationalisms of various sorts, and later by nationalist and equalitarian racial freedom movements, oppositional racial consciousness took on permanence and depth as *racial resistance*. Just as racial despotism reinforced white supremacy as the master category of racial domination, so too it forged racial unity among the oppressed: first native peoples assaulted and displaced by armed settlers, later Africans and their descendants kidnapped and reduced to mere chattel, and then conquered Latin@s/*mestiz@s* and superexploited Asian immigrants. Racial despotism generated racial resistance: Just as the conquest created the “Indian” where once there had been Pequot, Iroquois, or Tutelo, so too it created the “Black” where once there had been Asante or Ovimbundu, Yoruba, or Bakongo. What had once been tribal or ethnic consciousness—among enslaved Africans, Native Americans “removed” to reservations or decimated by settler violence, Latin@s forcibly denationalized and stripped of their lands, and Asian immigrants subjected to virtual *corvee* labor and then violently expelled from the communities they had created—ultimately became oppositional *race consciousness* and *racial resistance*. Thus in many ways racial despotism laid the groundwork for the creation of the racially based movements of today.

These patterns are now understood as “panethnicizing” processes. (Every racially defined group is a panethnic group.) They comprise not only the shared experience of suffering and the unifying pressures it brings to bear, but also the concerted self-activity of the oppressed to confront their tormentors and change their conditions. Panethnicity is a type of racialization; it is not without internal tension and conflict; it is often uneven and incomplete; it often does not liquidate ethnic difference but subsumes it; above all, it is a product of racial despotism.

The transition from racial despotism to *racial democracy* has been a slow, painful, and contentious one; it remains far from complete. A recognition of the abiding presence of racial despotism, we contend, is crucial for the development of a theory of racial formation in the U.S. It is also crucial to the task of relating racial formation to racial resistance, the broader current of political practice, organization, and change.

Over extended periods of time, and as a result of resistance of disparate types, the balance of coercion and consent began to change, to move *from domination to hegemony*. It is possible to locate the origins of hegemony right within the heart of racial despotism, for the effort to possess the master's tools—religion and philosophy in this case—was crucial to emancipation and to “freedom dreams” (Kelley 2003), crucial to efforts both individual and collective to possess oneself, so to speak, to achieve some degree of “self-determination” as a people. As Ralph Ellison reminds us, “The slaves often took the essence of the aristocratic ideal (as they took Christianity) with far more seriousness than their masters” (1964, xiv). In their language, in their religion with its focus on the Exodus theme and on Jesus's tribulations (Glaude 2000), in their music with its figuring of suffering, resistance, perseverance, and transcendence (Du Bois 2007 [1935]), in their interrogation of a political philosophy which sought perpetually to rationalize their bondage in a supposedly “free” society (Douglass 2000 [1852]), enslaved Africans and their descendants incorporated elements of racial rule into their thought and practice, turning them against their original bearers.

Racial rule can be understood as a slow and uneven historical process that has moved from despotism to democracy, from domination to hegemony. In this transition, hegemonic forms of racial rule—those based on consent—eventually came to supplant those based on coercion. But only to some extent, only partially. By no means has the United States established racial democracy in the 21st century, and by no means is coercion a thing of the past. But the sheer complexity of the racial questions U.S. society confronts today, the welter of competing racial projects and contradictory racial experiences which Americans undergo, suggests that hegemony is a useful and appropriate term with which to characterize contemporary racial rule.

What form does racial hegemony take today? In the aftermath of the epochal struggles of the post-World War II period, under the conditions of chronic crisis of racial meaning to which U.S. society has grown accustomed, we suggest that a new and highly unstable form of racial hegemony has emerged, that of *colorblindness*. In the following chapters, we discuss the post-World War II political trajectory of racial formation that has brought us to this point.

Notes

1. Ian Hacking (2006; 1999) has given us the phrase “making up people” to explain how the human sciences operate, but Hacking doesn't stop there: he discusses medicine, education, ideology, law, art, and state institutions as they do this work.

2. The notion of *intersectionality* was advanced by legal scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, who argued that both oppression and resistance are always situated in multiple categories of difference (Crenshaw 1989). Failure to grasp how categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class dynamically interact and shape one another, she asserted, led to a fragmented politics:

Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and anti-racist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. (Crenshaw 1991, 1242)

Two other key intersectionality theorists should be mentioned. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the mutual determination of race, gender, and class in her survey and theoretical synthesis of the themes and issues of black feminist thought. Collins invented the phrase “matrix of domination” to describe the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (Collins 2008 [1999] 227–228). Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues that race and gender are relational concepts in an interlocking system, providing a historical examination of citizenship and labor in the United States between 1870 and 1930. Glenn argues that these categories cannot be understood separately, but are defined and given meaning in relationship to each other: “Race and gender share three key features as analytic concepts: (1) they are relational concepts whose construction involves (2) representation and material relations and (3) in which power is a constitutive element” (Glenn 2002, 12–13). In many respects, race is gendered and gender is racialized. Inequality is always racialized and gendered as well. There are no clear boundaries between the “regions” of hegemony, so political conflicts will often invoke some or all these themes simultaneously.

3. “The truth is that there are no races; there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us. . . . The evil that is done is done by the concept, and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions as to its application” (Appiah 1992, 45). Appiah's eloquent and learned book fails, in our view, to dispense with the race concept, despite its anguished attempt to do so; this indeed is the source of its author's anguish. We agree with him as to the non-objective character of race, but fail to see how this recognition justifies its abandonment.
4. George L. Mosse (1985) argues that anti-semitism only began to be racialized in the 18th century. For a competing view, see Thomas 2010.
5. As Marx put it:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. (1967, 75)

David E. Stannard (1992) argues that the wholesale slaughter perpetrated upon the native peoples of the Western hemisphere is unequalled in history, even in our own bloody century. See also Lovejoy and Rogers, eds. 1994.

6. Debates of a similar nature also took place among the subjects of conquest and enslavement. On Native American perspectives, see Calloway 1994; Richter 2003; White 2010. On African perspectives, see Opoku-Agyemang et al., eds. 2008; Thornton 2012.

7. In Virginia, for example, it took about two decades after the establishment of European colonies to extirpate the indigenous people of the greater vicinity; 50 years after the establishment of the first colonies, the elaboration of slave codes establishing race as *prima facie* evidence for enslaved status was well under way. See Jordan (2012 [1968]).
8. In 1550–1551 two Spanish Dominicans, Bartolomeo de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, conducted a prolonged theological debate in Valladolid, Spain, about the humanity and spiritual status of Spain's Native American subjects. The debate was carried out at the behest of the Spanish king, Charles V, and in the shadow of the Inquisition. While ostensibly theological, and thus focused on such questions as the status—or even presence—of the souls of the Indians, the debate also addressed questions of Spanish imperial development strategy, notably the scope and legitimacy of slavery and the status of the *encomienda* system vis-à-vis religious and royal authority. See Hanke 1974; Todorov 1984.
9. For a pointed, parallel demonstration of the imperative of racial classification during relatively early stages of conquest, see the genre of Mexican *casta* paintings (Denver Art Museum 2004; Katzew 2005).
10. Proslavery physician Samuel George Morton (1799–1851) compiled a collection of 800 crania from all parts of the world, which formed the sample for his studies of race. Assuming that the larger the size of the cranium translated into greater intelligence, Morton established a relationship between race and skull capacity. Gossett reports that “In 1849, one of his studies included the following results: the English skulls in his collection proved to be the largest, with an average cranial capacity of 96 cubic inches. The Americans and Germans were rather poor seconds, both with cranial capacities of 90 cubic inches. At the bottom of the list were the Negroes with 83 cubic inches, the Chinese with 82, and the Indians with 79” (Gossett 1997 [1965], 74). When Steven Jay Gould reexamined Morton's research, he found that the data were deeply, though probably unconsciously, manipulated to agree with his “a priori conviction about racial ranking” (1981, 50–69).
11. See UNESCO 1950/1951. The production of the documents was coordinated by Alfred Metraux (1951). The 1950 authors included Professors Ernest Beaglehole (New Zealand), Juan Comas (Mexico), E. Franklin Frazier (U.S.), Humayun Kabir (India), Claude Lévi-Strauss (France), Morris Ginsberg (United Kingdom), and Ashley Montagu (U.S.). It was revised by Montagu “after criticism submitted by Professors Hadley Cantril, E. G. Conklin, Gunnar Dahlberg, Theodosius Dobzhansky, L. C. Dunn, Donald Hager, Julian S. Huxley, Otto Klineberg, Wilbert Moore, H. J. Mullet, Gunnar Myrdal, Joseph Needham, and Curt Stern” (ibid, 35). The 1950 document was criticized as excessively sociologically oriented; the 1951 revision included text drafted by anthropologists, geneticists, and biologists as well. On Metraux see Prins 2007.
12. These are complex cases. The Cherokee Freedmen are the descendants of black slaves owned by the Cherokee (Jones 2009). The Seminole Blacks are the descendants of U.S. maroons who fled slavery to tribal lands in Florida, Indian territory controlled by Spain until 1821. The U.S. fought two “Seminole Wars” (1817–1818 and 1835–1842) to recapture the area and reimpose slavery. Many Seminoles were transported (or fled) to the Oklahoma territory, but some remained in Florida. In 1849, threatened by slave-raiders, c.200 armed Black Seminoles under the leadership of John Horse escaped from Florida and conducted a heroic “long march” across slave-holding Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas.

- Accompanied by some traditional (i.e., non-black) Seminole comrades led by the Seminole chief Coacochec. This amazing feat culminated in their crossing into abolitionist Mexico in July 1850; they formed a community in Coahuila that is still called *Nacimiento de los Negros*. See Mulroy 2007.
13. The Implicit Bias Test (IAT) was developed in the mid-1990s by experimental/social psychologist Anthony G. Greenwald. It has spawned a large literature and been applied to various issues of bias (notably race, gender, and stereotyping of various types) in numerous settings, particularly educational, political, and legal. For a small sample of relevant work by Greenwald and collaborators, see Greenwald et al. 2003; Greenwald et al. 2009; Kang et al. 2012.
14. The legacy of Kant is particularly evident here (McCarthy 2009), but sociological and psychological concepts such as “consciousness of kind” (Giddings 1932) have also acquired great followings over the years.
15. See “The Conservation of Races” (1993 [1897]), an early statement that has occasioned much debate among Du Bois scholars (Marable 1986, 35–38; Appiah 1992, 28–46; Lewis 1993, 372–373; Reed 1997a).
16. Boas's work has drawn contemporary criticism for its residual essentialism; his early physical anthropology at times overwhelmed his vaunted cultural relativism (Boas 1912a, 1912b; Williams 1996).
17. Park's *Race and Culture* (1950) is still useful; see also Lyman 1992; Steinberg 2007. Locke's 1915 lectures at Howard University, unpublished until 1992, bear a remarkable resemblance to contemporary racial theories and comparative historical sociologies of race (Locke 1992 [1915]).
18. Proposition 54 was defeated, less because voters wished to preserve racial categorization as an overall state practice, but rather because in a few particular areas of state activity they had been convinced that maintaining racially based data was good for society overall. A particularly crucial source of Connerly's defeat was a series of campaign ads run by medical societies arguing that collecting racial data was important for public health purposes (HoSang 2010).
19. In August, 2012 the Bureau announced that it was considering redefining the Top of Form–Bottom of Form “Hispanic” category to the status of a racial category, possibly called “Hispanic/Latino,” that would be equivalent on the form to white or black. See Cohn 2012.
20. We are not unaware, for example, that publishing this work is itself a racial project.
21. *Floyd, et al. v. City of New York, et al.*, a class action suit brought by the Center for Constitutional Rights on behalf of victims of “stop and frisk” racial profiling by New York City police, was decided on August 12, 2013. Federal judge Shira Scheindlin decided for the plaintiffs and ordered a series of modification and reforms of “stop and frisk.” See Center for Constitutional Rights 2013. Challenges to the decision suggest that the case's ultimate outcome remains in doubt.
22. Racial jurisprudence largely relies on the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment and on the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The full extent of Supreme Court rulings on the nature of racism cannot be addressed here. An exemplary decision is *Washington v. Davis* (U.S. Supreme Court 1976), which established the rule of “invidious discriminatory purpose” as the criterion for determining if discrimination had occurred. The Court understood “purpose” as “intent” and refused to extend its concept of discrimination to include “disparate

- impact”; in other words the consequences of practices alleged to be discriminatory were officially ignored. See Pillai 2001.
23. Bonilla-Silva defines this view as an “institutionalist perspective,” in which “racism is defined as a combination of prejudice and power that allows the dominant race to institutionalize its dominance at all levels in a society (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 466). See also Katz 2003.
 24. See our debate with Joe Feagin and Chris Elias over these issues: Feagin and Elias 2013; Omi and Winant 2013.
 25. In practice, this just means rendering the racial dimensions of race informal, outside explicit legal regulation, but still subject to political pressures, and thus to racist projects and anti-racist ones as well. Thus it may be an overstatement to say that such restrictions were “abolished.”
 26. This term refers to the practice, widespread throughout the Americas, whereby runaway slaves formed communities in remote areas, such as swamps, mountains, or forests, often in alliance with dispossessed indigenous peoples. The Black Seminoles discussed above were a maroon people.

CHAPTER 5

Racial Politics and the Racial State

“[H]istorical reality is completely obfuscated in the myth of an all-inclusive contract creating a sociopolitical order presided over by a neutral state equally responsive to all its colorless citizens.”

—Charles W. Mills¹

Introduction

Race is consummately political. The instability of the race concept and the controversies it generates are emblematic of the racially contradictory society in which we live. In the United States, a system of racial rule has always been in place, operating not merely through macro-level, large-scale activities, but also through micro-level, small-scale practices. The racial regime is enforced and challenged in the schoolyard, on the dance floor, on talk radio, and in the classroom as much as it is in the Supreme Court, electoral politics, or on the battlefield of Helmand province. Because racial formation processes are dynamic, the racial regime remains unstable and contested. We cannot step outside of race and racism, since our society and our identities are constituted by them; we live in racial history.

Race is a vast and variegated theme. Any racial theory is a work-in-progress. Race is a factor not only in politics and history, but also in economy, culture, experience ...; it is a fully-fledged *social fact* like class or gender. Like those other large markers race is an unstable set of *collective representations* as well.² We focus here on racial politics and the racial state because through politics, through struggles over power and freedom, we can see race and racism being remade both social structurally and experientially. What we call racial projects have interacted over half a millennium to build up the *social structures* of race and racism. A parallel *experiential dimension* exists as well: The short-term, present-tense experience of racial subjectivity, in which new racial projects are being launched and interacting all the time.³

Looking at racial politics in general and the racial state in particular also allows us to consider the state–civil society distinction: The state may represent the core of a given racial regime, but no state can encompass all of civil society. People conceive of, operate, and inhabit their own racial projects (within broader constraints) and “experience” race in distinct and varied ways.

To theorize racial politics and the racial state, then, is to enter the complex territory where structural racism encounters self-reflective action, the radical pragmatism

Latino, Asian, and Native American—were all limited by the problematic of racial “lumping,” the downside, so to speak, of the “peoplehood” framework. Within each racially-derived notion of “the nation”—the black nation, Aztlán and panethnic concepts of *La Raza*, indigeneity, and Asian American panethnicity as well—there were enormous divisions, class-based, ideological, and ethnic. Collectivity proved ephemeral, and thus the concept of peoplehood faltered as well.

Beyond this, nation-based activists and intellectuals were unable to delineate a successful strategy to oppose racial reaction. Although the sense of peoplehood that lies at the core of nationalism could not be consolidated theoretically or practically, it did survive as an informal cultural framework. Especially in the black community, where it had a centuries-long history, nationalism was quite resilient (Walters 1997; Dawson 2003). Amplifying and diffusing the already present race-consciousness that existed within and among communities of color, the nation-based paradigm continued to operate as a theoretically rich framework for cultural and political activism. Although constantly susceptible to the pitfalls of authoritarianism (Gilroy 2000) and to decay into apolitical symbolism, today the nation-based paradigm has shed many of its earlier separatist and merely gestural dimensions. Perhaps what Huey P. Newton once called “intercommunalism” is the direction in which 21st century U.S. racial nationalism is heading. Reductionist as it may be, to the extent that this paradigm has been able to uphold the banner of race consciousness through the dark night of colorblind racial hegemony, it offers clues and lessons for the U.S. racial future.

* * *

The three paradigms of race that developed during the postwar period were all limited by their partiality. They all relied on one central category—culture, inequality, or peoplehood—in their interpretations of racial dynamics in the United States. None of the paradigms had a clear conception of race itself. All reduced race to a manifestation of another, supposedly more fundamental, sociopolitical cleavages or differences.

This reductionism systematically neglected the uniqueness of race: its corporeal manifestations, its ubiquity, its permanent instability. Since racialization began in the early days of conquest and slavery, race has infused all identities in North America: we emphasize its scope and sweep. Racial identification, racial interpellation, has always involved “lumping,” both by the state and in everyday society.

Just as some people (mainly property-holding white men) have benefited through the authoritarian and dehumanizing characteristics of racial difference, others (mainly working people of color) have continually resisted those dynamics. Practices of resistance have sought to reinvent racial identities and to overturn racial institutions: hence the permanent instability we stress throughout this book. Because the racial paradigms of ethnicity, class, and nation were all based on the reduction of race to a manifestation of some other, supposedly more fundamental and “objective” human or social characteristic, none of the paradigms could visualize race as a unique

type of social identity and social structure, corporeal, central to modernity itself, varying across time and space, operating at both the individual and collective levels of U.S. (and world) society. Consequently, the race-concept remained something of a theoretical cypher, a congeries of distinct and unreconciled elements: Politics, ethics, culture, collectivity, history, geography, science, and religion all partook of race, and all jostled for influence over its meaning.

Still, despite their limitations the three paradigms each contributed something important to the mix of racial theory; they each furnished some of the key dimensions of the synthetic account of racial formation theory that we have presented here.

Trajectories of Racial Politics

Derrick Bell insightfully described and lamented the “permanence of racism” (1992). We acknowledge that racism is a constitutive dimension of U.S. society, but we also argue that racism has limits, that it is widely contested, and that it is both politically organized and politically resisted. So how should we understand racial *change*? We answer this question by focusing on the trajectory of U.S. racial politics in the post-World War II period.

From the standpoint of the black movement and its allies, this trajectory can be envisioned as a rising and then falling arc. The movement achieved substantial democratic reforms only to see these gains substantially, if not completely, contained starting in the 1970s. Containment involved greater inclusion in the U.S. racial system, but did not eliminate the inveterate white supremacy whose origins lay in the colonial and slavery era. From the standpoint of the U.S. racial regime, the trajectory proceeded conversely: A long-standing pattern of stability and social control was disrupted and transformed by the black movement’s radical political challenge. This destabilizing threat was subsequently contained, in part by repression, but mainly by incorporation. What was crucial to the recalibration of the U.S. racial system was the political and ideological rearticulation of the movement’s vision of race and democracy.

It was an enormous achievement to put an end to official Jim Crow—the legally sanctioned and popularly supported (by most whites at least) racial despotism that had governed the United States for almost a century. The enactment of civil rights laws in the mid-1960s marked a real if partial democratization, an accommodation of the demands of a mass movement too wide and too deep to be resisted any longer. The post-World War II shift or racial “break” (Winant 2001) involved more than legislated and judicial reforms. Political incorporation was required as well as large-scale cultural reorientation. Both the mass movement and the elite supporters of civil rights also saw the reforms as essential elements of U.S. foreign policy, key ideological and political responses to the Cold War and the anti-imperial upsurge sweeping the “darker nations” of the planet (Prashad 2007; Dudziak 2011).

Civil rights reforms happened, though movement demands were often compromised and attenuated in the process of translating them into law. As Bell noted, major

reforms could only be enacted in a "moderate" fashion, and only if their key provisions were acceptable to whites and compatible with the supposed values of U.S. politics and culture: the American "civil religion" of individualism, equality, competition, opportunity, and the accessibility of "the American dream" to all who strove for it. For movement activists and intellectuals, acceptance of the reform agenda meant forgoing a more radical vision of social transformation in exchange for short-term gains, or facing marginalization or repression if they would not.

The radical vision that was largely abandoned was the "dream," Dr. King's dream, in which racial justice (not color blindness) played the central part. King's vision in "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," his April 4, 1967 speech at New York's Riverside Church, also definitively linked the civil rights movement with anti-imperialism around the world (King 2002a). To be "free at last" meant something deeper than the gaining of partial access to key social and political institutions. It meant more than limited reforms and palliation of the worst excesses of white supremacy. It meant a *substantive reorganization of the U.S. social system*. It meant political implementation of egalitarian economic and democratizing political measures. Above all it meant redistribution of resources along social democratic lines and the extension of full citizenship to people of color. This radical alternative was also intimately linked to *global* questions: notably the end of U.S. war-making in the global South, particularly in Vietnam.

To achieve such a radical democratic program was beyond the reach of the 1960s black movements and its allies. The black movement in particular was facing repression, was internally divided along many axes, and lacked sufficient "mainstream" (that is white) support.

It was especially in reference to issues of redistribution that the "moderate" custodians of racial reform drew their boundary line, both in practical terms and in theoretical ones. To undo official, explicit, legalized racial inequality was permissible; to create racial equality through positive state action was not. Economic and political elites were threatened by the prospect of redistribution. Demands for substantive redress for the unjustified expropriation and restriction of black economic and political resources, both historically and in the present, were both economic and political anathema to the ruling class. Redistribution of resources to people of color meant not only social democracy but *radical* democracy, the political inclusion of millions whose marginalized status had guaranteed not only white supremacy but also elite rule for centuries. The potentially permanent linkage between the "third world" abroad and the "third world within" was also particularly frightening to the established powers (Kelley 1996; von Eschen 2006).

To contain such a radical vision, moderate civil rights reform became part of the political mainstream, which moved from domination to hegemony. The key component of modern political rule, of hegemony as theorized by Gramsci most profoundly, is the capacity to *incorporate opposition*. By selectively adopting the movement's demands, by developing a comprehensive program of limited reform that hewed to

a centrist political logic and reinforced key dimensions of U.S. nationalist ideology, political elites were able to define a new racial "common sense." This new racial ideology celebrated (and inflated) the significance of the concessions won. It divided the movement between more moderate and more radical tendencies. It permitted the reassertion of a certain broad-based racial stability, and defused a great deal of political opposition.

The partial reconfiguration of the U.S. racial system both made real concessions and left major issues unsettled and unaddressed. The fundamental problems of racial injustice and inequality, and of white supremacy more generally, remained: moderated perhaps, but hardly resolved. As the trajectory of post-World War II racial politics swung into its declining phase in about 1970, after the supposed triumph of the "civil rights revolution," the U.S. state, the nation's cultural apparatuses, and the people themselves had to manage and reconcile the contradictory conditions that anti-racist movements and civil rights reforms had created. This was, and remains, a tough assignment.

Sure, reforms happened. But race also retained its significance as a definitive dimension of the U.S. social structure. In other words, race continued to define North American identities and institutions. The "post-civil rights" era tugging and hauling, the escalating contestation over the meaning of race, resulted in ever more disrupted and contradictory notions of racial identity. The significance of race ("declining" or increasing?), the interpretation of racial equality (colorblind or race-conscious?), the institutionalization of racial justice (reverse discrimination or affirmative action?), and the very categories—black, white, Latin@/Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American, that were employed to classify racial groups—all these were called into question after the civil rights "victories" of the mid-1960s.

The declining phase of the political trajectory of race has now lasted more than four decades, despite the 2008 election of Barack Obama and his reelection in 2012. Yes, Obama has proved disappointing in many respects, but the expectations attending his ascent were outlandish across the entire political spectrum.

Over the post-World War II decades, the *rearticulation* of racial ideology has been central both to the rise and the containment of the black movement and its allied movements. Rearticulation was a key weapon in the movement's rise: It provided a vital moral component of the movement's claim to represent the true American ideals; it played a crucial role in the movement's development of nonviolent strategy and tactics. It enabled the movement's "inside/outside" political strategy.

But the racial reaction also learned how to use strategies of rearticulation to defuse the radical democratic and egalitarian thrust of the movement. Rearticulation proved far more effective than repression in containing the radical thrust of the black movement, and of its allied movements as well. A clear sequence of ideological tropes deepened and extended "post-civil rights" era rearticulations of racism: first code words, then reverse racism, and finally colorblindness.

At each stage of its development, the racial reaction carried out what we might call cumulative "latent functions" (Merton 1968). Code words channeled white

shame, fear, and rage; reverse racism deracialized discrimination, effectively absolving whites; and colorblindness reasserted American nationalism and the "unity" of "the American people" across the supposedly disappearing boundaries of race.

Based on this evolving racial "common sense," the racial reaction was able to build a mass base, largely but not entirely composed of working- and middle-class whites who were threatened by racial equality and racial democracy. These whites (or their parents and grandparents) had benefited from the welfare state under the New Deal, which was predominantly a whites-only affair, and was quite anti-immigrant as well. When the New Deal restrictions on social investment in communities of color were lifted in the mid-1960s, many whites got off the freedom train.

The new right worked assiduously to fan white racial fears (code words), and to stigmatize such state-based reform policies as affirmative action, fair housing, and desegregation, as discriminatory toward whites (reverse racism). It revived nativism. Joined by right-wing populist anti-tax groups and armed with the age-old ideology of producerism, reverse racism activists reframed their defense of white privileges as a political and legal offense. Although they claimed to be fighting discrimination of all types, their real problem was civil rights reforms such as affirmative action, fair housing, voting rights, and immigration.¹⁰ Ultimately, after years of Supreme Court hedging and trending toward the right, it became clear that the Court viewed racial discrimination as something that happened principally to white people.

But the containment of civil rights was not the end of the racial reaction's project to reverse the gains of the movement. The objective had always been larger than that. It was to dismantle the welfare state, to limit taxation and other forms of regulation of capital, and to ensure the docility and desperation of the "others": the poor, the workers, who were increasingly people of color but also white people, and even the middle classes. This was the neoliberal agenda. It was nationalist and "authoritarian populist."¹¹

Neoliberalism both overlapped with and required colorblindness. It required a racial ideology that repudiated the civil rights agenda of state-enforced equality and state-based extension of democratic rights, without regressing to explicit white supremacy or reverting to explicit policies of Jim Crow segregation. Repelling, repressing, and rearticulating the black movement's (and allied movements') agendas would not be enough for this purpose. In order to achieve hegemony for the neoliberal project of reinforced social inequality in a U.S. rid of its welfare state, with all the redistributive dimensions of social rights finally repudiated, it would be necessary not only to oppose demands for racial justice and racial democracy; it would be necessary to take race off the table.

Colorblindness as a Hegemonic Racial Project

Today, in the 21st century, the concept of "colorblindness" is hegemonic in the United States. It has become the racial common sense and *desideratum* of our time. This does not mean that it is free of contradictions, however.

Those advocating a colorblind view of race assert that the goals of the civil rights movement have been substantially achieved, that overt forms of racial discrimination are a thing of the past, and that the United States is in the midst of a successful transition to a "post-racial" society. From a colorblind standpoint, any hints of race consciousness are tainted by racism. Thus it is suggested that the most effective anti-racist gesture, policy, or practice is simply to ignore race (Skrentny 1996; Connerly 2007). Critics of colorblindness, in contrast, point to the pervasive presence of race and racism—white supremacy—throughout the U.S. social structure. They emphasize the enduring significance of race and the persistence of racism, arguing that it continues to generate inequality across the entire society, most notably in such areas as education, employment, criminal "justice," health, and housing, but elsewhere as well. In order to address the persistence of racial inequalities, they argue that race-conscious policies and practices are necessary, specifically to target and address the sources and causes of racial disparities (Brown et al. 2003; Feagin 2006; Kennedy 2013).

Both positions lay claim to the legacy of the black movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, colorblindness itself both reflects and subverts that legacy. Early on, colorblindness provided the general framework for anti-racist movement goals, a moment most familiar from the famous sentence in Dr. King's August 28, 1963, speech: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King 2002b)¹² But colorblindness represented something very different in the last years of Jim Crow segregation than it did in the early 21st century. In August 1963 as the marchers converged on the Lincoln Memorial and Dr. King's and other civil rights leaders' voices rang out across the capital, overt racism, the U.S. version of *apartheid*, was still the law of the land. Desperate public officials and private citizens, many of them avowed white supremacists, were determined to preserve it at all costs from the growing consensus that sought change.

And things did change. An overtly racist ideology, buttressed by "scientific" claims, was widely disavowed. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 led to the subsequent demise of state and local Jim Crow laws. Anti-miscegenation laws were deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967. Colorblindness, therefore, cannot simply be seen as a deceptive political hoax or naive matter of wishful thinking. It is a result, however intended or unintended, of the partial dismantlement of the U.S. *apartheid* system in the 1960s. Only by challenging that system, and by creating new, more egalitarian racial dynamics, was it even possible to advance the colorblind position.

"Partial dismantlement." Consider the contrast between the 1960s and today. Half a century later, racism is mostly tacit. Although profiling is ubiquitous and discriminatory practices are often thinly veiled at best, explicitly racial laws are frowned upon. Although race is supposedly a suspect category, courts wink at implicitly discriminatory measures and indeed preoccupy themselves with supposed discrimination against whites. The reforms of the civil rights era seem increasingly ineffective

against an ongoing structural racism that sees, hears, and undoes no evil. To ignore ongoing racial inequality, racial violence, racial disenfranchisement, racial profiling, quasi-official resegregation of schools and neighborhoods, and anti-immigrant racism—it's a long list—under the banner of colorblindness is to indulge in a thought process composed in substantial parts of malice, disingenuousness, and wishful thinking.

Can we really embrace a colorblind approach to race in the face of recurrent nativism with its "show me your papers" laws and extensive network of harassment, imprisonment, and deportation? Can we ignore the existence of a prison system whose highly disproportionate confinement of black and brown people is a national scandal? Mass incarceration has become a racialized system of social control and super-exploitation with blacks and Latinos making up more than 60 percent of the current prison population (Mauer 2006 [1999]; Alexander 2012). Health disparities by race remain clearly evident with regards to access to healthcare, disease prevention, and life expectancy (Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003; Ansell 2011). Can we agree with the colorblind approach to race when, as Gary Orfield and Erica Frankenberg (2013), Jonathan Kozol (2012 [1991]), and many others have documented, school segregation has not only persisted but been both exacerbated and normalized in the United States? Can we accept claims that racism is "a thing of the past" when median white net worth is now *twenty times* greater than median black net worth, having *more than doubled* since the onset of the great recession of 2008 (Kochhar et al. 2011; see also Oliver and Shapiro 2006)? Regressive redistribution almost as abysmal has plagued Latin@s over the same period. How can such a rapid shift for the worse, how can a leap in economic inequality of such dramatic scope, be blamed on anything other than the victimization of black and brown people who aspired to middle-class status? How can it be reconciled with the concept of colorblindness?¹³ How can we take seriously professions of belief in colorblind attitudes, when they are rife with irrationalities and contradictions (Brown et al. 2003; Carbado and Harris 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2009; Wise 2010)? From the cradle to the grave, race continues to shape and define our prospects, opportunities, life chances, and dreams.

Even more ominous is the realization that even past gains can be rolled back. In June 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court substantially weakened the Voting Rights Act, thereby allowing nine states to change their election laws without advance federal approval (Liptak 2013). This decision allows states, counties, and municipalities to enact or move forward with voter identification laws that have the effect of disenfranchising groups of color. Was our confidence in Jim Crow's passing premature, as Derrick Bell argued?

The litany of racial inequalities goes on (and on), but the appeal of colorblind ideology cannot be easily dismissed. It promotes a compelling common sense, a general "rule of thumb," to guide and inform both institutional and individual practices. It provides a facile means for individuals to denounce racist beliefs and actions of a certain type—those that are explicit, overt, unconscionable, and morally unacceptable.

Colorblindness allows people (mainly whites, but not only whites) to indulge in a kind of anti-racism "lite." While explicit forms of racial animus (such as hate speech) are widely condemned, policies and practices that continue to produce racially disparate outcomes are accepted and even encouraged under the guise of moving us "beyond" race and towards a truly colorblind society.

Not surprisingly, attitudes vary by race regarding the persistence of racial inequality and whether the state needs to proactively do something about racial discrimination. In July 2013, Gallup pollsters asked respondents, "Do you think new civil rights laws are needed to reduce discrimination against blacks?" While only 17 percent of whites replied "yes," 53 percent of blacks and 46 percent of Latinos replied in the affirmative (Gallup 2013). We may all want to get to the post-racial promised land, but group differences abound with respect to how far along the road we are and what are the best means by which to get there.

Despite the withering criticism directed at the concept of colorblindness, we will not succeed in overthrowing colorblindness if we see it as erroneous, deceptive, or merely a hoax. *Colorblindness is also aspirational.* Indeed it is precisely because the old U.S. apartheid system was formally dismantled, and because the new racial dynamic that was substituted for it was more open and fluid, that it became possible to advance the colorblind position. That it has attained hegemonic status as the racial "common sense" of the present has been the outcome of a prolonged period of rearticulation by the political right—a sustained attempt to contain the radical democratic potentialities of what we call the Great Transformation.

As a racial project, indeed as a bid for racial hegemony in the United States today, colorblindness is a rude beast: ineffective, uneven, ungainly, deceptive, contradictory. But since hegemony itself is about the selective and strategic incorporation of opposition, it comes as no surprise that there are contradictions in the very logic of colorblind ideology. In the long run, colorblind racial ideology is only credible and can only "work" to the extent that it reflects the successes of the "post-civil rights" era in ameliorating racial injustice and inequality. A purely fabricated, mythical colorblindness could hardly be sustained intellectually, politically, or even socially in the interactions of everyday life. The effectiveness of colorblind ideology depends on its verisimilitude, on the credibility of its claim that U.S. racial conditions have improved—that we now have less discrimination, less racial violence, less racial repression and, correspondingly, more tolerance, more equality, and more inclusion.

Concepts of race, racial categories, and racial meanings continue to haunt and circulate in all social domains. Both in everyday life and in the political sphere, race organizes U.S. society. In civil society, people continually use race: We rely on perceived racial categories in social interaction, in the presentation of self, and to "navigate" in varied social settings. Consider such matters as getting a job, shopping in a department store, attending university, or dating. In political life too *the state needs race to rule*. Racial profiling and mass (racial) incarceration, for example, have become constitutive of the policies and practices of social control. Patterns of immigration and

developing trends in U.S. racial demography have created and revived a whole series of political opportunities. Ongoing nativist appeals exploit white anxieties about the nation's future and fears of the "other" in our midst. Immigrant rights advocates rally an electorate increasingly composed of people of color on behalf of redistributive economic policies and the extension of democratic rights. Overall, however, structural racism still steers the ship of state. Disinvestment in education generates a "school to prison pipeline" (Knefel 2013). Persistent poverty and unemployment, engineered under neoliberalism by the failure to carry out needed social investment, produces increased demand for social control and repression. In the United States, all of this is immediately understood in racial terms.

Race-Consciousness as a Racial Project

Critics of colorblind ideology have argued that race-conscious policies and practices are necessary to address the persistent and entrenched forms of racial inequality in the United States. What does it mean to "notice" race?

Just as colorblind racial ideology occludes recognition of race beneath the veneer of a supposedly already-accomplished universality, race-consciousness works to highlight racial differences and particularities. This may take various forms, both democratic and despotic, both emancipatory and reactionary. Generally speaking, race-consciousness involves *noticing* the social fact of race, the presence of racial identity/difference, racial inequality, and racial hierarchy. Across a broad political spectrum ranging from left to right, from social practices of inclusion to those of exclusion, conflicting racial projects make use of these concepts, practices, and structures for a wide range of purposes. How is racial identity (signification) linked to racial inequality and hierarchy (domination and subordination)? How are new racial projects generated?

At one extreme, there is an aggressive white supremacist movement, organized to a significant extent, and with many sympathizers as well. This movement is generally far right; it has a substantial Internet presence on various racist and fascist sites. There is a substantial neo-Confederate political current in the United States that bridges between the far right and new right (Murphy 2001; Sack 2001; MacLean 2009). Although we have mentioned these political currents from time to time, and have noted their anti-democratic, counter-egalitarian, and biologically racist proclivities, we have not devoted extensive attention to them in this book.

The new right largely avoids, or seeks to suppress, its connections with the white supremacist race-consciousness of the far right. For the most part, the new right has embraced colorblind racial ideology, melding it as far as possible with neoliberalism. To be sure there are endless occasions when the race-consciousness that colorblindness seeks to suppress busts out into the open: in arguments for "the right to discriminate" for example, or in producerism (recall Mitt Romney's "47%" analysis of electoral politics, delivered in Boca Raton, Florida, in 2012). Our key point

here is that colorblindness is yoked to neoliberal assaults on the welfare state and to exclusionary, anti-democratic (small "d") politics.

On the left, there is an egalitarian, radical democratic, anti-racist current. Composed of numerous organizations concerned not only with countering explicitly racist actions, policies, and discourse, but also with improving and strengthening the status and living conditions of people of color, various movement groups and their supporters are active across the entire range of social and political conflicts. Indeed they often address issues that are not explicitly framed in racial terms: rape crisis centers, battered women's shelters, tenants' rights groups, access to quality education, immigrants rights....

For the racial justice movement, noticing race and achieving race consciousness is a very different matter than it is in the white supremacist or new right areas of the political spectrum; in no sense is this movement the "equal and opposite" of the right wing. Anti-racism affirms the goal of achieving greater social justice; this is continuous with the political logic and moral appeal that remain from the era of civil rights and black power (and, of course, from the more distant past). For all its incompleteness and disorder, the quest for radical racial democracy remains a left-wing racial project: dedicated to redistribution (an egalitarian social structure) and to the recognition of difference (racial identity) rather than its denial. This approach to race-consciousness highlights the ongoing presence and significance of racial identity, racial inequality, and racial injustice. It takes seriously the unfulfilled social justice agenda of dismantling American *apartheid* and upholds the goals of extending the reforms of the civil rights movement and challenging existing structures of racial domination. On the left, there is a general recognition—obviously incomplete and not always explicit—that racial identity is an issue of freedom and self-activity. In other words, there are or should be choices about how we racially "represent ourselves in everyday life," to speak Goffman-ese. To be able to act black or act white, to embody one's *latinidad* or not to do so, are or should be options we have, not compulsions subject to stigma, constraint, or profiling (Carbado and Gulati 2013). This race-consciousness is explicitly or implicitly *radically pragmatist*. It acknowledges the social structures and practices of race and racism: the vast fabric of inclusion and exclusion, advantage and disadvantage, and power and powerlessness that are built into a social system based on structural racism. There is an ill-defined but palpable racial solidarity here as well, something akin to the "peoplehood" concept that inspires racial nationalisms of all types.¹⁴

Drawing attention to race—racial identity and difference, racial inequality and oppression, racial exclusion and violence—allows us to question the inconsistencies and platitudes of colorblind racial ideology. But we recognize that race consciousness harbors certain contradictions as well. "Essentializing" race is always possible: treating it as a fundamental, transhistorical marker of difference can reduce race to a sort of uniform people are made to wear, thus reproducing—however consciously or unconsciously—the stereotyping that characterizes racism itself.¹⁵

We also draw attention to the risk of authoritarianism lurking behind race consciousness—observable not only in the obvious authoritarianism of white supremacy, apartheid, and colonialism, but also in movements framed in opposition to these regimes. The authoritarian trap has plagued many resistance and oppositional movements. Democratic commitments in Marxist movements, for example, have given way to Stalinism and other forms of repression; anticolonial movements have spawned dictatorships; religious movements against persecution have persecuted their own dissenters; feminism has been split, sometimes in highly antagonistic ways, between “difference” and “inequality” factions, with some groups denouncing others quite vitriolically. Race consciousness, though an obviously indispensable rejoinder to the shallowness of colorblindness, cannot deny the inherent fluidity and sociohistorical situatedness of racial identity and racial difference, without risking a collapse into a authoritarianism of its own (Gilroy 2000, 1999).

Not only amongst the talking heads on TV or in the far-fetched racial jurisprudence that dominates the present period, but also in everyday life today, we are often exposed to the putative common sense of “post-civil rights” era colorblindness. Many of our students tell us that they “don’t see race,” that “a person is just a person” to them, and that they seek “to treat everyone as an individual.” Mostly, of course, it is white students who say this, but by no means do these expressions come only from the lips of whites.

For a long time we argued with such claims: “You don’t see race? Have you had your eyes checked lately?” (On this point, see Obasogie 2013.) But in recent years we have come to see that response as counterproductive, tending to validate the self-righteousness that frames colorblindness—whether willfully or naively. We are now taking a new approach in our efforts to counter the “anti-racism lite” that such positions entail. Rather than arguing directly against colorblindness, we want to recognize the unresolved dimensions, the contradictions that necessarily follow from the civil rights movement’s (and its allies’) combined accomplishments: their incomplete but real successes, their tentative visions of a solidaristic and “beloved” community, as well as their mistakes and limits, their necessary compromises, and their repression at the hands of a state and society built on racial despotism. Most of all, we want to recognize and rework the racial reaction’s post-1980s rearticulation of anti-racism into colorblindness. It was this long-acting racial project that most effectively contained the radical democratic aspirations of the black movement and its allies.

Racial Rearticulation: Can It Happen Again?

If the “post-civil rights” years are characterized by anything, it is the experience of tension between colorblindness and race consciousness. Rather than denying that race matters, rather than arguing that nothing has changed, we should go deeper into the *contrarities of race*.

Although drawing attention to race—racial identity and difference, racial inequality and oppression, racial exclusion and violence—allows us to question the

depth and seriousness of colorblind racial ideology, we also want to recognize that race-consciousness exhibits contradictions as well. It is easy to mischaracterize race or misinterpret the significance of racial identity. Just when does race matter, anyway? Always, sometimes? If the answer is “sometimes,” what about those situations when race “doesn’t matter”? Are there conditions under which we should *not* notice race? Is not racial identity often ambiguous and contradictory? How should we interpret transracial solidarity and alliance? How should we interpret transracial identity, or transracial friendship, or indeed love across the color-line? These old themes no doubt retain something of their transgressive and unsettling character, but they are also increasingly normal, regular, and unremarkable (Daniel 2001; Parker and Song, eds. 2001). Can trust and solidarity exist across racial lines? Is it possible either in individual or collective social practice, to “get beyond” race? If so, how definitive is racial identity? If not, what are the implications for multiculturalism, democracy, humanism?

Race, we argue, has served as a fundamental organizing principle of injustice in the United States—one that has influenced the definition of rights and privileges, the distribution of resources, and the ideologies and practices of subordination and oppression. Racial domination has defined processes of “otherness” and marginalization; over the years it has “made up people” in ways that have indelibly shaped other dimensions of inequality and difference in the United States. Even under colorblind hegemony, race still operates as a master category: It is something that *must* be denied, or else the whole ideology of “American exceptionalism,” “the American assumption” (Du Bois’s term for “the American dream”), “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” and indeed “the American people” itself, falls into tatters.

We have described racial formation as a process of continuing encounters between despotic and democratic racial projects. As hegemonic racial ideology, colorblindness has to be enforced, not only in state policies and court decisions, but in popular culture and everyday life as well. This means that colorblind racial ideology and the social fact of race consciousness have a deep and uneasy relationship with one another (Carbado and Harris 2008). Sure, to challenge colorblindness you must be race-conscious. But to police the ideological boundaries of colorblindness you must *also* be race-conscious.

Although the state needs race to rule, it is also confronted by anti-racist opposition and constrained by its own commitment to the achievement of racial hegemony through the “colorblindness” construct. In general, it cannot explicitly name, utilize, or exploit the race concept; instead it is forced to exercise racial rule covertly. The effects of the Great Transformation still resonate. This is a contradictory and conflictual situation, in which the racial regime simultaneously *disavows* its raciality and *deploys* it as broadly and deeply as ever. The crisis of hegemonic colorblindness generates the continuing instability of race in the United States today. Colorblindness underwrites neoliberal policies of superexploitation, anti-welfare statism, and “accumulation by dispossession.” Here we see the limits of President Obama’s post-racial

appeals, and the enormous difficulties involved in stemming, much less cleaning up, the ongoing accumulation of racial "waste."¹⁶ These contradictions extend to everyday life, where, on the one hand, we are supposed to be "postracial" and colorblind, and, on the other hand, we remain as race-conscious as ever!

Given the instability and processual quality of racial formation—Gramsci's "formation and overcoming of unstable equilibria"—the hegemony of colorblind racial ideology seems particularly vulnerable and transitory. Changing domestic demographics, patterns of migration, the organization of repression, the politics of poverty, and propaganda initiatives (aka "the news")—to pick just some obvious terrains—are all bubbling cauldrons of racial conflict. It is not likely that race consciousness is going to subside over time, especially in a social environment trending steadily towards deepening inequality in many social domains, and moving inexorably towards a "majority-minority" demographic.

Colorblindness is a highly contradictory phenomenon. In the past, it was a call for racial equality and inclusion. Today, it is largely an ideological framework for the effacement of race consciousness. But it can also be a vehicle for *deepening and variegating race consciousness*, especially if we can rearticulate the concept to mean something like "race-conscious when you need to be, when democracy and justice demand you to be." A new and better understanding of race would recognize that the race concept's meaning is being made and remade from moment to moment. This understanding points to a *radical racial pragmatism*.

Throughout this book, we have emphasized the concept of *rearticulation*. This idea refers to the *ideological appropriation of elements of an opposing position*. It is thus a central part of hegemony, which proceeds by "incorporating opposition." After the 1960s, the racial reaction appropriated the ideal of colorblindness—which had been a radical, movement ideal—thereby turning it into a cheap simulacrum of the movement's ideal, a parody of the "dream," something that ratified instead of challenged the racial status quo. *Was that then the end of the story?* Was that the only time that such a bold political move could be pulled off? Or can that appropriation, that theft of a democratic ideal, be *re-appropriated, rearticulated once again*, such that a new paradigm of race based *both* on difference and solidarity, *both* on particularity and equality, might emerge? We would certainly not want to call such an ideal "colorblind," but we would expect it to include the possibility of overcoming racial difference, at least in part, through a creative type of consciousness and action, a radical racial pragmatism. An emphasis on "self-reflective action," to invoke a term from John Dewey (1939), is at the heart of the new racial politics needed in the 21st century.

The desire remains strong—not only in our hearts but in those of many others—for a more emancipatory concept of race and a more fulfilling, less conflicted, race consciousness. What would that look like? To be very specific, *what do you want your race consciousness to be?*¹⁷

If colorblind hegemony falters, if the "common sense" appeal of colorblindness cannot be consolidated, if the emperor of colorblindness is revealed to be wearing no

clothes, then what comes next? From a colorblind perspective, one has not to "notice" race, not to see it. Or one wouldn't be "blind" to it, right? But what happens to race-consciousness under conditions of colorblind hegemony? Quite clearly, awareness of raciality does not dry up like a raisin in the sun. Just as colorblind racial ideology serves as a means to occlude recognition of race beneath the veneer of a supposedly already-accomplished universality, race-consciousness works to highlight racial differences and particularities. It can be linked to despotic or democratic ends, framed in defense of coercion, privilege, and undeserved advantage, or alternatively deployed in support of inclusion, human rights, and social justice.

Parallel to the question, what do you want your race consciousness to be? is another question: *What would a racial justice-oriented social policy look like to you?* What types of policies and practices—at the level of the state, civil society, and major institutions—would help us achieve a more comprehensive, deeper, and lasting racial democracy in the United States? We offer our own answers to these questions in the final section of this chapter.

Since racism is so large, combating it must also be a large-scale practice. The reparations idea provides a valuable guidepost here (Munford 1996; Henry 2007). Reparation means repair, making whole, making good what was evil. As a sociopolitical project, reparations can be seen to extend from the large to the small, from the institutional to the personal (Yamamoto 1999).

Redistribution fits as well, but here we must be careful: The politics of income and wealth distribution are "double-entry" bookkeeping items. Not only the allocation of resources is involved, but also the derivation of revenues. If reparations were to be paid for the crime against humanity that was African slavery, it would be important to look at both the inflow and the outflow sides of the process. On the outflow side, reparations should take the form of social investment (think of a "Marshall Plan for the Cities" or something similar). Payments to individuals or families would be problematic. Slavery's historical outcome in structural racism is the main evil we want to annul. On the inflow side, there is a danger that reparations would be paid out of general revenues, unduly assessing present-day working people for the crimes of past colonialists, slavocrats, and robber barons, perpetuating rather than attenuating racial conflicts, and allowing new variants of the colorblind argument to loom up in the future. An alternative revenue-oriented strategy would raise the money by means of a wealth tax, thus recognizing how many present-day capital hoards had their origins in slavery. Insurance companies indemnified slaveowners if their slaves escaped or shipbound Africans revolted, for example (Ogletree 2003).¹⁸

Beyond reparations, anti-racist practice can be understood macro-politically in terms of *social citizenship* and micro-politically in terms of *acculturation and socialization*.

The concept of *social citizenship* was proposed by T.H. Marshall (1950) as an obligation of the post-World War II welfare state, the proximate stage in the achievement of popular sovereignty. Rights, Marshall argued, had been acquired by the populace in historical stages: first economic, then political. The time had now come for the achievement of *social rights*. He meant that it was now possible and indeed necessary to consolidate and deepen the welfare state: not only through strengthening the social "safety net" but through inclusion, through the institution of far-reaching social democracy. Marshall's framework was post-World War II Britain, and perhaps the industrial democracies of Europe and the United States. It was offered when the British flag still flew over Lagos and Singapore, and when Jim Crow still flourished; it was proposed when postmodern criticism of the limits of "rights talk" (in critical race theory, for example) had not yet been made. His idea of social rights did not encompass the diasporic and globalized issues of inequality and injustice that anti-racists face today. Yet we can make use of the concept of social rights to think anew about political inclusion, social provision, even world citizenship.

By *acculturation and socialization* we mean the reawakening of the 1960s concept that "the personal is political" as a key principle of anti-racist personal practice. No one—no matter what their racial identity is—can be free of racism in their heads or hearts; it is too deeply ingrained in the U.S. social structure. Structural racism determines that a comprehensive system of advantages and disadvantages—economic, political, cultural, and psychological—suffuses U.S. society. Yet a great deal of thought and action has been devoted to the problem of fostering anti-racist practice at the individual and experiential level. Developing these skills, fostering the interruption and interrogation of racism, and extending the reach of anti-racism in workplace, politics, family, school, cultural life, and indeed every interaction, is an important dimension of the practice we want to support.

While we have offered some tentative and sketchy answers to these questions, on a deeper level such serious issues can only be addressed adequately through the creative thought and political action of many people. Those are the masses, the multitude, whose "freedom dreams" (Kelley 2003) can transfigure and rearticulate the unstable and conflicted racial system yet again. Racial formation theory was developed to help explain the post-World War II challenge to the U.S. system of racial oppression: its rise and fall, its successes and failures. Surely, those movement-based challenges were not the last we shall ever know. If our approach has any value, it lies in the suggestion that racial politics is a *creative practice*, both individual and collective. Our actions and ideas—both individual and collective—should be seen as projects that have the potential to undo racial injustice and generate broader racial equality, creating greater freedom in every way. Racial formation theory should help us think about race and racism as *continuing encounters between despotism and democracy*, in which individuals and groups, confronted by state power and entrenched privilege but not entirely limited by those obstacles, make choices and locate themselves over and over in the constant racial reconstruction of everyday life.

Notes

1. Douglass 2000 (1862), 485.
2. Winant (2001) offers a theoretically oriented historical sociology of the rise of the race-concept and the racialization of the planet in the modern epoch. For additional literature see Count 1950; Hannaford 1996; Davis 1999 [1975]; Fredrickson 1997; Bernasconi and Lott, eds. 2000. Obviously, any brief list will only scratch the surface of this vast topic.
3. The historical accounts provided by Thornton (1998), Lovejoy and Trotman (2003), Mullin (1995), and others suggest that African ethnicities may have been intermediate forms of slaves' collective mobilization. Thornton argues, for example, that numerous slave revolts were betrayed as a result of inter-ethnic rivalries. These authors also discuss how in the U.S. context slave owners, and the market in human chattel all on its own, worked to break up ethnic ties on individual plantations and in particular localities. Klein and Luna (2009) discuss some of these patterns in Brazil.
4. There are masculine tropes here as well: the "Sportin' Life" character in *Porgy and Bess* (Du Bose Heyward and George and Ira Gershwin, 1935); convict leasing and indeed incarceration itself as instances of race/class/gender intersectionality. The racist male tropes that have been applied to President Obama on innumerable web sites and political publications have their origins in 19th-century minstrelsy and 20th-century film culture (Bogle 2001; Robinson 2007; Lowndes 2013).
5. We 20th and 21st-century writers can only imagine the ridicule to which our great efforts at racial theorizing will be subjected in later periods. We can only welcome our critics, present and future....
6. Of course, "the Doctor" had important precursors: Frederick Douglass, George Washington Williams, and others, but none achieved his comprehensive level.
7. "[W]e've been here before," writes Robin D.G. Kelley,
We were here with Latasha Harlins and Rodney King, with Eleanor Bumpurs and Michael Stewart. We were here with Anthony Baez, Michael Wayne Clark, Julio Nuñez, Maria Rivas, Mohammed Assassa. We were here with Amadou Diallo, the Central Park Five, Oscar Grant, Stanley "Rock" Scott, Donnell "Bo" Lucas, Tommy Yates. We were here with Angel Castro, Jr. Bilal Ashraf, Anthony Starks, Johnny Gammage, Malice Green, Darlene Tiller, Alvin Barroso, Marcillus Miller, Brenda Forester. We've been here before with Eliberto Saldana, Elzie Coleman, Tracy Mayberry, De Andre Harrison, Sonji Taylor, Baraka Hall, Sean Bell, Tyisha Miller, Devon Nelson, LaTanya Haggerty, Prince Jamel Galvin, Robin Taneisha Williams, Melvin Cox, Rudolph Bell, Sheron Jackson. And Jordan Davis, killed in Jacksonville, Florida, not long after Trayvon Martin. His murderer, Michael Dunn, emptied his gun into the parked SUV where Davis and three friends sat because they refused to turn down their music. (Kelley 2013)
8. The dynamics of immigration have shifted dramatically between the turn of the 20th century and the present. The U.S. now relates to the global South and global East through a policy of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2005). Immigrants are a lot darker than they were a century ago. Displaced and impoverished workers and peasants from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as from the Pacific Rim, continue to immigrate, their human flow modulated but hardly contained by boom and bust, "bubble" and recession.

And the United States has also become more racially predatory domestically, practicing a similar policy of "accumulation by dispossession" at home as well. Consider post-Katrina New Orleans or the subprime housing crisis—to pick just two prominent examples. So is the United States less able to integrate immigrants than it was in previous historical periods? Where will the country find an "engine of mobility" to parallel that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the epoch of mass labor recruitment to the industrial economy? In short, the country's economic capacity to absorb enormous numbers of immigrants, low-wage workers and their families, and a new globally based (and very female) servant class (see Glenn 2002), without generating the sort of established subaltern groups we associate with the terms race and racism, seems to us more limited than was the "whitening" of Europeans a century earlier, this argument's key precedent. On this matter, see Perlmann 2005.

9. "Reforms" in quotation marks here because the ACA was (a) modeled on a Heritage Foundation proposal later enacted by a Republican governor, Mitt Romney, then of Massachusetts; and (b) won support from the FIRE sector (the industries of Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate) by promising to deliver c.50m new customers to private insurance companies on a silver platter. Owning a health insurance policy was made mandatory, a tax according to the Supreme Court. The small alternative, the "public option," was dumped. In fairness Obama did succeed at raising taxes slightly on the rich when the Bush II tax cuts expired. The cost of that was being forced to accept the "sequester," Congress's withholding of funding for already enacted social programs (as well as military spending). The 2013 cost of the sequester was \$85.4b (Congressional Budget Office 2011). All hail progressive and redistributive reform!
10. The Supreme Court legal doctrine of "invidious intent" helped the racial reaction tremendously, because anti-racism policies and programs logically framed their objectives in racial terms. By contrast advocates for the racial *status quo* could argue in "colorblind" terms.
11. On this concept, see the debate between Bob Jessop, Stuart Hall, et al. in *New Left Review* (Jessop et al. 1984; Hall 1985).
12. Noting the distortions and perversions perpetrated—largely by the right wing—on Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Michael Eric Dyson once proposed a ten-year moratorium on referring to it (Dyson 2001). That moratorium has now expired. The speech belongs to the tradition that Bercovitch (1978) called the "American Jeremiad."
13. The calamitous 2008 recession impacted groups of color far more than it did whites. From 2005 to 2009, median net worth fell by 66 percent among Latino households, 54 percent among Asian households, and 53 percent among black households compared with a decrease of just 16 percent among white households (Kochhar et al. 2011, 14). The entire subprime mortgage crisis was a racial crisis, with disproportionate numbers of black and Latino borrowers facing foreclosures and losing their homes. Long excluded from equal access to mortgage credit, people of color were first "steered" into unsustainable loans, and then dispossessed of their meager equities through foreclosures, "short sales," and often fraudulent banking practices.
14. Of course, white supremacy and authoritarian racism generate solidarity too. As Herbert Blumer pointed out, "race prejudice" against another group is often the most effective and rapid means of establishing solidarity and "group position," both for the individual within her/his "own" group, and for the group itself to fortify its adhesive capacity (Blumer 1958).

15. Some scholars have warned about the scholarly reification of race, suggesting that race should not be treated as something "real"—as a legitimate social category in its own right, untethered from the mooring of racial oppression. This is visible in writings about the subject, sometimes large books, that insist on placing quotation marks around the term "race" (Darder and Torres 2004). While we have learned from many of these works, we stress that the instability of the race-concept does not imply the non-existence of race.
16. On racism as "waste," see Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001. These authors draw the concept from Bataille 1988–1991.
17. Some of the following text appeared in earlier form in Omi and Winant 2012.
18. British slaveowners were compensated for their "losses" in 1833 when Parliament abolished slavery, and North American slavocrats regained their autarchic local autonomy in the "Compromise" of 1877, which Du Bois (2007 [1935]) called a counterrevolution. No former slaves were ever compensated for their losses of family members, property, or pay, much less their kidnapping, confinement, and torture at the hands of their "masters."