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Race and Race Theory

Howard Winant
Department of Sociology, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104; e-mail: hwinant@nimbus.temple.edu

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■ **Abstract** Race has always been a significant sociological theme, from the founding of the field and the formulation of classical theoretical statements to the present. Since the nineteenth century, sociological perspectives on race have developed and changed, always reflecting shifts in large-scale political processes. In the classical period, colonialism and biologistic racism held sway. As the twentieth century dawned, sociology came to be dominated by US-based figures. DuBois and the Chicago School presented the first notable challenges to the field's racist assumptions. In the aftermath of World War II, with the destruction of European colonialism, the rise of the civil rights movement, and the surge in migration on a world scale, the sociology of race became a central topic. The field moved toward a more critical, more egalitarian awareness of race, focused particularly on the overcoming of prejudice and discrimination. Although the recognition of these problems increased and political reforms made some headway in combatting them, racial injustice and inequality were not surmounted. As the global and domestic politics of race entered a new period of crisis and uncertainty, so too has the field of sociology. To tackle the themes of race and racism once again in the new millennium, sociology must develop more effective racial theory. Racial formation approaches can offer a starting point here. The key tasks will be the formulation of a more adequate comparative historical sociology of race, the development of a deeper understanding of the micro-macro linkages that shape racial issues, and the recognition of the pervasiveness of racial politics in contemporary society. This is a challenging but also exciting agenda. The field must not shrink from addressing it.

INTRODUCTION

As the world lurches forward into the twenty-first century, widespread confusion and anxiety exist about the political significance and even the meaning, of race. This uncertain situation extends into the field of sociology, which has since its founding devoted great attention to racial themes.

The extent of the literature on the race concept alone, not to mention the mountains of empirical studies that focus on racial issues, presents difficulties for any attempt at theoretical overview and synthesis. A wide range of concepts from both the classical and modern traditions can readily be applied to racial matters.

Variations among national and cultural understandings of the meaning of race cry out for comparative appproaches. World history has, arguably, been racialized at least since the rise of the modern world system; racial hierarchy remains global even in the postcolonial present; and popular concepts of race, however variegated, remain in general everyday use almost everywhere. Thus, any effective sociological theory of race seems to require, at a minimum, comparative historical and political components, some sort of sociology of culture or knowledge, and an adequate microsociological account.

Over the past few decades, interest in racial matters, and the pace at which racial dynamics have been changing worldwide, have both increased dramatically. Controversy over the meaning and significance of race was greatly heightened after World War II. The war itself had significant racial dimensions and left a legacy of revulsion at racism and genocide. The social movements and revolutionary upsurges that succeeded the war and brought the colonial era to an end also raised the problematic of race to a new level of prominence. The civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid mobilization in South Africa are but the most prominent examples of this. As it gained its independence, the postcolonial world was quickly embroiled in the competition of the Cold War, a situation that placed not only the legacy of imperial rule but also the racial policies of the superpowers (especially those of the United States) under additional scrutiny. Another consequence of the war was enormous migratory flows from the world's rural South to its metropolitan North; in these demographic shifts the empire struck back, pluralizing the former mother countries (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982). All these developments raised significant questions about the meaning of race.

SOCIOLOGY'S RACIAL ODYSSEY

In this article I survey the theoretical dimensions of race as the new century (and new millennium) commences. I begin with an account of the *origins of the race concept.* Here I consider how the theme of race, though prefigured in earlier ages, only took on its present range of meanings with the rise of modernity. The deep interconnection between the development of the modern world system—of capitalism, seaborne empire, and slavery—and the exfoliation of a worldwide process of racialization is not in doubt.

Next I examine how sociological theory has addressed the linkage between modernity and race. I argue that, not surprisingly, *the sociological study of race has been shaped by large-scale political processes.* The founding statements of sociological theory, the so-called classics, were above all concerned to explain the emergence of modernity in Europe. Whether they understood this to mean the dawn of capitalism, the advent of "disenchanted" forms of social organization, or the generation of complex dynamics of social integration and solidarity, they could hardly escape some reckoning with the problem of the Other, however s/he was defined: as plundered and exploited laborer, as "primitive" or "uncivilized," or as "traditional" or mechanically solidaristic.

After sociology's center of gravity migrated across the Atlantic, racial themes became more central. Dealing with social problems such as crime, poverty, and disease; addressing urbanization, stratification, and underdevelopment; and confronting social psychological issues as well, analysts again and again had recourse to racial themes.

Contemporary approaches to the race concept have by and large parted with the biologism of the past, although some vestigial viewpoints of this type can still be detected (such as those of *The Bell Curve* authors). The sociology of race was vastly stimulated by the political, cultural, and demographic shifts that took shape in the postwar decades.

But as we begin the twenty-first century, sociological theory is confronted with the obsolescence of the Big Political Processes, such as decolonization and civil rights, that drove the theoretical vehicle forward from the war's end. So now, racial theory finds itself in a new quandary. Empires have been ended and Jim Crow and *apartheid* abolished (at least officially). How then is continuing racial inequality and bias to be explained? Some would argue that since racial injustice is at least tendentially diminishing, the race concept is finally being obviated: In the globalized twenty-first century, world society and transnational culture will finally attain a state of colorblindness and racial (or better, ethnic) pluralism. Others note that this new situation—of multiculturalism or diversification—provides a much prettier fig leaf for policies of *laissez-faire* vis-a-vis continuing racial exclusion and inequality than any intransigent white supremacy could ever have offered. But whatever political disagreements underlie the ongoing difficulties of racial theory, there can be little doubt that these difficulties persist.

In the final section of this paper, I offer some *notes toward a new racial theory.* Any such account must take seriously the reformed present situation: postcolonial, postsegregationist (or at least post–official segregation), and racially heterogeneous (if not "integrated"). It must also note the continuing presence of racial signification and racial identity, as well as the ongoing social structural salience of race. Racial theory must now demonstrate comparative and historical capabilities, as well as addressing the formidable problem of the micro-macro linkage that inheres in racial dynamics. As this already suggests, such a theory would also incorporate elements (let us call them revisionist elements) of recent political sociology: process models of politics, new social movement theory, and constitution theories of society. Over the past two decades, racial formation theory has made the most serious attempt to fulfill this mission.

This is obviously no small assignment; only the contours of such a new theoretical approach to race can be outlined here. But I am confident that these notes, however elliptical, will facilitate access to a substantial body of work already underway, not only on race, but on the great multitude of issues, both substantive and conceptual, that it intersects. After all, the theme of race is situated where meaning meets social structure, where identity frames inequality.

ORIGINS OF THE RACE CONCEPT

Can any subject be more central or more controversial in sociological thought than that of race? The concept is essentially a modern one, although prefigured in various ways by ethnocentrism, and taking preliminary form in ancient concepts of civilization and barbarity (Snowden 1983), citizen (or *zoon politikon*) and outsider/slave (Hannaford 1996, Finley 1983). Yes, the Crusades and the Inquisition and the Mediterranean slave trade were important rehearsals for modern systems of racial differentiation, but in terms of scale and inexorability the race concept only began to attain its familiar meanings at the end of the middle ages.

At this point it would be useful to say what I mean by "race." At its most basic level, race can be defined as a *concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies.* Although the concept of race appeals to biologically based human characteristics (phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. There is no biological basis for distinguishing human groups along the lines of race, and the sociohistorical categories employed to differentiate among these groups reveal themselves, upon serious examination, to be imprecise if not completely arbitrary (Omi & Winant 1994).

The idea of race began to take shape with the rise of a world political economy. The onset of global economic integration, the dawn of seaborne empire, the conquest of the Americas, and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade were all key elements in the genealogy of race. The concept emerged over time as a kind of world-historical *bricolage*, an accretive process that was in part theoretical,[1] but much more centrally practical. Though intimated throughout the world in innumerable ways, racial categorization of human beings was a European invention. It was an outcome of the same world-historical processes that created European nation-states and empires, built the dark satanic mills of Britain (and the even more dark and satanic sugar mills of the Brazilian Reconcavo and the Caribbean), and explained it all by means of Enlightenment rationality.

But this is not to say that the European attainment of imperial and world-encompassing power gave rise to race. Indeed it is just as easy to argue the opposite: that the modern concept of race gave rise to, or at least facilitated the creation of, an integrated sociopolitical world, a modern authoritarian state, the structures of an international economy, and the emergence over time of a global culture. We must recognize all these issues as deeply racialized matters.

[1]Religious, philosophical, literary/artistic, political, and scientific discourses all were directed in a never ending flood of ink and image to the themes of "the Other"; variations in human nature; and the corporeal, mental, spiritual, sexual, and "natural historical" differences among "men." To the extent that this discussion addressed itself to the problem of patterns of human difference/identity and human variability, it may be fairly characterized as about race. To cite some valuable texts among a virtual infinity: Hannaford 1996, Gossett 1965, Todorov 1985, 1993, Kiernan 1969, Montagu 1997 [1942], Banton 1987.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RACE HAS BEEN SHAPED BY LARGE-SCALE POLITICAL PROCESSES

The "Classics"

When we look at the treatment of racial matters in sociological theory, we find the concept present from the beginning, though often in an inchoate, undertheorized, or taken-for-granted form. Herbert Spencer, the usual example cited as the *ur*-sociologist, reads as a biological determinist today, preoccupied as he is with human evolution and the ranking of groups according to their "natural" characteristics.[2]

Marx's orientation to themes we would now consider racial was complex. His denunciation in *Capital* of the depredation, despoliation, and plunder of the non-European world in pursuit of primitive accumulation,[3] and his ferocious opposition to slavery, both commend him. But his insistence that the colonized pre-capitalist societies would ultimately benefit from their enmeshment in the brutal clutches of the European powers hints to present-day readers that he was not entirely immune to the hierarchization of the world that characterized the imperial Europe of his day.

Weber's treatment of the concept of *ethnie* under the rubric of "status" (a relational category based on "honor") presages a social constructionist approach to race; but in Weber's voluminous output there is no serious consideration of the modern imperial phenomenon, there are numerous instances of European chauvinism,[4] and there is an occasional indulgence in—let us call it—racialist meditation.[5] Durkheim too ranks the world eurocentrically, distinguishing rather absolutely

[2]Early treatments of the race concept in Europe and the United States combined supposedly biologistic or natural history–based conceptions of race with a high degree of arbitrariness, if not outright incoherence, in their application. Numerous groups qualified as "races": national origin (the Irish) and religion (Jews) as well as the more familiar criteria of color were frequently invoked as signs of racial otherness. Although this fungibility has been somewhat reduced and regularized over recent decades, it still remains in effect and indeed can never be supplanted by "objective" criteria. See the discussion of racial formation below.

[3]"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. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations with the globe for a theater. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England's AntiJacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars with China, etc." (Marx 1967:351).

[4]Especially during the World War I years, when Weber was seriously afflicted with German nationalism.

[5]In fairness, Weber also recognizes racism, notably anti-black racism in the United States. See his remarks on U.S. racial attitudes in Gerth & Mills 1958:405–6. Weber's sensitivity to U.S. racial matters may be attributed, at least in part, to the orientation provided him by Du Bois. See Lewis 1993:225, 277.

between "primitive" and "civilized" peoples based on the limited ethnology available to him; he also muses somewhat racialistically.[6]

It is not my purpose to chide these masters. Far from it: They acquit themselves well when compared to the rank-and-file pundits and even the *bien philosophes* who were their contemporaries. They can hardly be expected to have remained totally immune from the racial ideology of their times. But that is precisely the point: Sociological thought arose in an imperialist, eurocentric, and indeed racist era, both in Europe and in the United States. In its classical early statements, it was racially marked by the time and place of its birth.

Across the Atlantic

It was largely in the United States that the early sociology of race first forsook the library for the streets, partaking in the great empirical effloresence that marked the field's establishment in that country. There was an inescapable association between the discipline's development in this period (the early twentieth century), and the rise of pragmatism in US philosophy and progressivism in US politics during the same epoch. Nor is it hard to understand why race was promoted to a more central sociological concern as the discipline acquired its foothold—indeed its headquarters—in the United States. This was, after all, a country where African slavery was still an artifact of living memory, where the frontier had only recently been declared closed, where immigration was a flood stage, and where debates over the propriety of imperial activity (in the Phillipines, for example) were still current.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a nearly comprehensive view of the race concept still located it at the biological level. On this account, races were "natural": their characteristics were essential and given, immutable. Over the centuries such approaches had accomplished a wide range of explanatory work. Both the defense of slavery and its critique (abolitionism) had appealed to "natural" criteria in support of their views. In a similar vein the holocaust visited upon indigenous peoples, as well as the absorption of large numbers of former Mexican, Spanish, and Asian subjects through war and coercive immigration policies, had been justified as "natural," inevitable forms of human progress.[7] Even after emancipation and the "closing of the frontier" in the United States, scientific arguments still summoned "natural causes" to the defense of hierarchical concepts of race. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the impact of social Darwinism was

[6]Racial categories are employed as "social types" in *Suicide*, for example. See Fenton 1980.

[7]The Chicago theorists, particularly Park, proposed a deterministic version of this argument in the form of a "race relations cycle" through which macrosocial encounters between "peoples" were argued to pass. The four stages of the "cycle" were held to succeed each other more or less inevitably: first contact, then conflict, succeeded by accommodation, and finally assimilation. Residues of the "natural history" logic of race can be detected here, to be sure, but there is also something of a social constructionism at work. For example, Park suggests that alternative power dynamics among racially defined groups are possible at each of the cycle's phases.

enormous (not merely on Herbert Spencer), and the arguments of eugenics also acquired great support.

But the world racial system underwent significant shifts in the early twentieth century. As labor demands grew more complex and the agenda of democratization gradually assumed greater importance, biologistic racial theories became increasingly obsolete. The resurgence of anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia (a century after the success of such movements in the Americas), the spreading of democratic demands to countries considered "backward" and "uncivilized," and the increased mobility (both geographic and economic) of ex-slaves and former peasants during and after World War I, all motivated the gradual but inexorable development of a more sophisticated social scientific approach to race.

The two early twentieth century examples of pathbreaking racial theorizing that require mention here are the pioneering study by W.E.B. Du Bois of black life in Philadelphia (Du Bois 1998 [1899]), and the extensive body of work on racial matters that formed a crucial component of the Chicago School of sociology. Both these pioneers were oriented by the pragmatism that was the most original, and remains the most important, contribution of North American sociological theory.

Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*[8] sought both to make a significant advance over previous knowledge (overwhelmingly ignorant and stereotyped) about black life and US racial dynamics; and to build, upon a solid base of empirical data, a powerful and strategic argument for the democratization of race relations in turn-of-the-century America. Though slightly marred by concessions demanded of Du Bois by his patrons (or perhaps imagined necessary by him) the work still stands, an entire century later, as a magisterial survey of the unique racial dementia of the United States: the country's foundational involvement with African enslavement and the permanent consequences of that involvement. In addition to his pathbreaking approach to racial theory, particularly evident in his concept of "the veil" and his understanding of racial dualism (Du Bois 1989 [1903]), Du Bois's early work is notable for its relentless empirical commitments and independent application of pragmatist philosophy (West 1989) to the sociological enterprise, both theoretical and practical. As Elijah Anderson points out in his introduction to the centennial reissue of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1996 [1899]), the tendency

[8]One should cite much more of Du Bois's contributions to the foundations of US sociology, and indeed to democratic theory and practice in respect to race: the Atlanta studies, the historical sociology (most notably *Black Reconstruction in America* (1977 [1935]), and an astounding wealth of other work (see Lewis 1995 for a good selection of materials). While Du Bois was not entirely ignored by the "mainstream" of the field, he was hardly given his due recognition either. As noted, Du Bois was associated with Weber, whom he had come to know in Berlin. The complex set of influences shaping Du Bois's intellectual and political development has been much explored in recent scholarship: He combined a high German philosophical, historical, and social scientific training with solid roots in American pragmatism (notably his work with William James), and a deep engagement with the popular African-American traditions he first met as a college student in the South (see Du Bois 1989 [1903]), Du Bois 1991 [1940]), Lewis 1993, West 1989, Marable 1986).

to attribute these innovations to more "mainstream" sociologists for many years banished Du Bois from his rightful place in the disciplinary canon.

The large body of work on race produced by the researchers of the Chicago School also demonstrates the influence of pragmatism and progressivism. Oriented by a social problems approach and consciously viewing the city of Chicago as a sociological laboratory, the Chicago sociologists authored a group of studies focusing on crime, poverty, "slums," etc., all problems that were frequently seen racially. The approaches that developed in Chicago were notable for their attentiveness to their empirical subjects, and for their intrinsically democratic orientation. Moving from the preliminary work of Burgess, through the great creativity and comprehensiveness of Thomas & Znaniecki's massive study,[9] the Chicago engagement with the problematic of race culminated in the work of Robert E. Park on the macro-dimensions of race (Park 1950).[10] There was also an important micro-side of the Chicago tradition, which proceeded from Mead and deeply informed Blumer's work on the symbolic dimensions of race (Blumer 1958). Perhaps most important, the work of the Chicago sociologists broke definitively with the racial biologism that had characterized earlier treatments, asserting with increasing clarity the position that race was a socially constructed, not naturally given, phenomenon.[11] The influence of this view on crucial later treatments of race throughout the social sciences—for example, Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) or Drake & Cayton's magisterial work (Drake & Cayton 1993 [1945])—was enormous. The Myrdal study would not even have come into being, much less exercised the tremendous political influence it did (Southern 1987, Jackson 1990), without vast assistance from Chicago-trained scholars.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE RACE CONCEPT

The same dynamics that prompted the Americanization of sociology and sparked the shift from classical theorizing to empirical research were also at work in the development of contemporary approaches to race. Once again, pressing sociopolitical issues drove the theoretical vehicle forward.

Sociological argument could only properly challenge biologistic positions after the race concept had been fully reinterpreted sociohistorically. Given the onrushing

[9]*The Polish Peasant* prefigured the entire contemporary field of migration studies (Thomas & Znaniecki 1994 [1923]). Thomas & Znaniecki's book on what would now be considered a white ethnic group could easily be seen as a racial work at the time of its original appearance.

[10]For a good overview, see Bulmer 1984.

[11]In this developing analysis, Chicago sociology not only led the field, but established the beginning of an interdisciplinary social scientific consensus. In cultural anthropology, the early contributions of Franz Boas—whom Du Bois invited to speak in Atlanta in 1911—were crucial here as well.

European disaster of facism, the task of elaborating a democratic and inclusionist theory of race fell largely to US scholars from the 1930s onward.[12] Here the sociological work carried out by the Chicago scholars and their successors, and the continuously powerful voice of Du Bois, combined with the insights and research of a growing number of progressive racial observers. To name but a few other important influences: the Boasian shift in anthropology, which refocused that discipline from physical to cultural preoccupations and had widespread effects in popular culture, was certainly significant. The association of fascism with eugenics—a movement that had developed strong bases both in Britain and the United States as well as in Germany—forced choices upon democratically and progressively inclined publics, both intellectual and political. The "retreat of scientific racism" was the result of these unsavory connections (Barkan 1992). Marxist accounts of race became more prominent in function of the upsurge of communism (a leading, though not unproblematic, antiracist influence, especially in the 1930s and 1940s). The growth of important black movements, both political and cultural,[13] also strongly affected the racial public sphere in the interwar period. And the liberal democratic ethos, strongly invoked in the United States by the wartime work of Myrdal, exercised tremendous influence (Myrdal 1944).

The Post–World War II Challenge

In the post–World War II period, the concept of race was more comprehensively challenged than ever before in modern history. Decolonization spread through the world's South, sometimes achieving its emancipatory aims by peaceful, or at least largely political, means and sometimes requiring prolonged warfare to dislodge the occupying northern (aka "white") power. Migration and urbanization of previously impoverished ex-colonials and former peasants—largely people of color—landed millions of dark faces in the world's metropoles. These newly urbanized groups soon mobilized and pressed for their political and social rights, contesting entrenched customs and institutionalized patterns of white supremacy and racism in numerous countries. Especially in the United States, the hegemonic postwar nation, these racially based movements took the political center-stage.

These new demands for inclusion, in turn, induced serious crises in national political systems. As racial regimes steeped in discriminatory or exclusionist

[12]Not exclusively of course. Resistance to nazism also bred important works, as did anticolonial struggle and cultural anthropology. A few examples: the Jewish and homosexual activist Magnus Hirschfeld first used (as far as I can tell) the term "racism" in a book he published with that title in 1935, whose topic was (logically) antisemitism. The pan-Africanist movement, which owed a lot to Du Bois, was well underway by this time, generating important works by such scholar-activists (and marxists) as George Padmore, C.L.R. James, and others. Boas's students such as Gilberto Freyre and Ruth Benedict were producing important studies on race in Brazil, as was exiled anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.

[13]Notably the Garvey movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the development of successful (though still effectively segregated) black media: music, film and theater, newspapers, etc.

traditions were pressured to innovate and reform, sociological approaches to race were also transformed. A great (although quite belated) interest in patterns of discrimination and prejudice developed.[14] Interest in patterns of racial inequality grew at the international level. Not only the mainstream sociology, but also the radical sociology of race advanced, spurred on by the new movements as well as by dissatisfaction with the pace and scope of reform (Blauner 1972; Ladner, ed. 1973).

While an obvious advance over earlier views, postwar racial theory was subject to numerous limitations, in both its moderate and its radical versions. Most problematic was the tendency toward *reductionism*: The three main theoretical tendencies all subordinated the race concept to some supposedly more objective or "real" social structure. *Ethnicity*-based theories were generally the most mainstream or moderate. They saw race as a culturally grounded framework of collective identity. *Class*-based theories understood race in terms of group-based stratification and economic competition. *Nation*-based theories perceived race in the geopolitical terms largely given by the decolonization process so prominent in the postwar era. They focused attention on issues of peoplehood and race unity, rootedness, citizenship, and irredentism.[15]

As the twentieth century (whose "problem is the color-line," as Du Bois had famously written) drew toward its end, these approaches to the race concept also neared their limits. They were informed by and oriented to the pressing sociopolitical problems of their time: notably racial prejudice and discrimination (especially state-sponsored discrimination). After these grievances had been forcefully raised in many countries by antiracist movements, they were generally at least ameliorated by democratic and inclusionist efforts at reform. Although hardly eliminated by shifts in state racial policy, racial injustice became less visible as a result of these reforms, and overt racism was generally stigmatized. In such a situation the racial theory that sought to explain such phenomena slowly became obsolete. Thus are we left at century's end with a range of unanticipated, or at least theoretically unresolved, racial dilemmas.

The Limits of Contemporary Racial Theory

The inadequacy of the range of theoretical approaches to race available in sociology at the turn of the twenty-first century is quite striking. Consistent with the argument presented in this essay, this theoretical crisis can be seen as reflecting the continuing sociopolitical crisis of race. In particular, the *persistence of racially based distinctions*, distinctions that state-based racial reforms were supposed to overcome, poses major problems for racial theories inherited from the earlier post–World War II years.

[14]A valuable survey of "mainstream" sociological approaches to race in the United States over the entire twentieth century is Pettigrew 1980. For a more critical perspective, see McKee 1993.

[15]For a more extensive critical review of the reductionism of 1960s racial theorizing in the United States, see Michael Omi & Howard Winant 1994).

Ethnicity-oriented theories of race had suggested that the suppression of prejudiced attitudes could be achieved through contact, integration, and assimilation; and that discrimination could be ended by laws and regulations that made jobs, education, housing, and so on equally accessible to all. But the endurance of obstacles to integration severely undermined ethnicity-based approaches to race,[16] while assimilation into white cultural norms was hardly desirable to most racially defined minorities. Faced with these impasses in the United States today, ethnicity theories of race have devolved into neoconservatism, which can do no better than reprove racially defined minorities for their continuing race-consciousness and supposed failure to take advantage of civil rights reforms (Thernstrom & Thernstrom 1997). In Western Europe, these theories take the form of differentialism, which repudiates the racist cultural hierarchies of the past, but affirms the exclusionist commitments of (French, German, British etc.) "national culture," thus upholding barriers to immigration and racial pluralism, not to mention integration (Taguieff 1988, Wieviorka 1995, Balibar & Wallerstein 1991).

Class-based theories of race had argued that racial conflict was the mode in which class conflict was lived out or expressed (Hall et al 1978). This suggested that racial stratification and intergroup competition were fairly well-defined in the postwar world (Bonacich 1972, 1976, Gordon et al 1982, Reich 1981). If the inequality among racially defined groups was to be overcome, then this would require not only interracial solidarity, but also race-conscious programs designed to remedy the *effects* of discrimination. Such programs, put into place in many countries and under various names, have come to be known under the rubric of "affirmative action." But two factors have undermined the plausibility of this account. First, a growing inequality *within* racially defined minority groups weakens group cohesion both politically and culturally; this undermines the case for affirmative action. Second, enduring white commitments to racial privilege—that is, persistent racism—largely trump interracial working-class solidarity, defeating whatever potential for economic redistribution such programs as affirmative action may have offered. Thus, class-based theories of race have in practice been vitiated by the failure of the socialist (or social democratic, or New Deal) vision in the present epoch.[17]

Nation-oriented accounts of race have been called into question by the combined weight of international and intra-national heterogeneity. In a postcolonial era

[16]At a deeper level, governments often enacted racial reforms that were more symbolic than substantive, and enforced those they had managed to enact indifferently if at all. See Lipsitz 1998, Massey & Denton 1993 for U.S. examples.

[17]Perhaps the greatest effort to argue for a class-based contemporary racial theory in sociology has been that of William Julius Wilson. For more than two decades now Wilson has sought to present racial progress as dependent on generalized full-employment policies and politics. In recent work he has striven to revive well-used left arguments about the indispensability of interracial solidarity (Wilson 1996). But for all that is valuable in this approach, his dismissal of the continuing effects of racism, and of the experience of racial distinctions, is crippling. The sociocultural and organizational obstacles to interracial solidarity remain far more formidable than Wilson acknowledges.

that has witnessed tremendous migration, that offers unprecedented ease of movement, and that boasts of communicative powers (mass media, particularly music and film, but also telephonic and computer-based resources) unimaginable even a few years ago, the nation-based dimensions of racial solidarity have atrophied. Trans- (or perhaps post-) national forms of racial correspondence persist, but now take the form of *diasporic* identities of various kinds (Kilson & Rotberg, eds., 1976, Appadurai 1996, Lemelle & Kelley, eds., 1994). At this point, however, transnational racial solidarity generally lacks the kind of political commitment and organization once displayed under the banners of pan-Africanism or the "non-aligned" movements. In this situation, nation-based theories of race have devolved into crude and retro forms of cultural nationalism, informed more by mysticism than by social analysis.[18]

NOTES TOWARD A NEW RACIAL THEORY

If the strength of earlier theoretical accounts has atrophied and a new approach is needed, what would be its outlines? As a new century begins, a convincing racial theory must address the persistence of racial classification and stratification in an era officially committed to racial equality and multiculturalism. The present moment is one of increasing globalization and postcoloniality. It is a time when most national societies, and the world as a whole, are acknowledged to be racially multipolar, and when hybridity is frequently recognized as a key feature of racial identity. Today, in marked distinction to the situation that obtained before World War II, most states and members of state elites claim to oppose discrimination, deny their continuing adherence to racialized views of their populations, and may even claim to be colorblind or differentialist. How and why do racial distinctions endure in such changed circumstances?

Any minimally adequate theoretical response to this question must include recognition of the *comparative/historical dimension of race*. The mere fact that we are discussing race here and now (in a post-civil rights, post-cold war, post-colonial

[18]"Cultural nationalism" as politics and racial theory in the United States, Brazil, or South Africa may have entered a *cul-de-sac*, but it is essentially benign. The same cannot be said of the devolutionist nationalisms of the Balkans, Rwanda, or parts of South Asia, which have reintroduced the quasi-racist program of ethnic cleansing in forlorn and bloody attempts to achieve the utopian congruence of state and nation. Quite apart from the resemblance of such policies to genocides ancient and recent, they testify once again to the near-total hybridity of the human population and the impossibility of achieving any societal homogeneity, especially in the present. Such policies also reveal the flexibility of racialization, which has time and again been applied to exacerbate human distinctions not easily recognized (at least from "outside") as corporeal or phenotypic. Consider in this regard not only Hutu v. Tutsi or Bosnian Serb v. Bosnian Muslim, but also such cases of racialized conflict as: German "Aryan" v. German Jew, Palestinian Arab v. Israeli Jew, or British v. Irish.

period) itself imposes significant theoretical constraints and opportunities. As I argued earlier, earlier racial theories too were products of their times and places. We remain in a similar situation today.

A second dimension in which any successful theory must operate is the ability to range over, and hopefully to link, *the micro- and macro-aspects of racial signification and racialized social structure.* Such a multileveled and interconnected account is a general obligation of social theory in the present.[19] It is an obligation incurred by any attempt to conceptualize the continuing significance of race. A notable and intriguing feature of race is its ubiquity, its presence in both the smallest and the largest features of social relationships, institutions, and identities.

A third theoretical dimension will involve recognition of the *newly pervasive forms of politics* in recent times. This may be alternatively regarded as a racially conscious conception of action or agency. In the United States, much of the impetus behind the reconceptualization of politics that has occurred in recent decades was derived from racially based and indeed anti-racist social movements. The democratizing challenge posed after World War II to normal systems of domination and power, accepted divisions of labor, and rational-legal means of legitimation, all had inescapable racial dimensions. Racially based movements, then, and the second wave feminism that followed and was inspired by them, problematized the public-private distinction basic to an older generation of political theory and political sociology.[20] This has been recognized in new approaches to political sociology, such as political process models (McAdam 1982, Morris & Mueller, eds., 1992), It also appears in the revival of interest in pragmatist sociology, in symbolic interactionism, in constitution theories of society (Joas 1996, Giddens 1984), and in the belated revival of interest in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (West 1989, Lewis 1993, Winant 1997).

For the past few decades these themes have been developed in a body of theoretical work that goes under the general heading of *racial formation theory.* As one of the founders of this approach, I must stipulate from the beginning to the lack of consensus, as well as the overall incompleteness, of this theoretical current. Still, I submit that racial formation theory at least begins to meet the requirements for a sociological account of race, one capable of addressing the *fin-de-siecle* conditions adumbrated here.[21]

[19] See Huber 1991, Giddens 1984, Collins 1987, Alexander et al, eds., 1987.

[20] In non-U.S. settings, the new social movement phenomenon has not always been so clearly recognized as racially structured. This is particularly notable in Europe where its study was prompted by the vicissitudes of the new left, the resurgence of feminism, the rise of green politics, and the upsurge of terrorism in the 1970s (Melucci 1989). But in the third world the rethinking of political theory and political sociology in terms of issues of subjectivity and of identity often took on a racial dimension. Consider the legacy of Fanon for example.

[21] Numerous writers now employ racial formation perspectives, both within sociology and in other social scientific (as well as in cultural studies, legal studies, etc.). See for example Gilroy 1991, Crenshaw et al 1995, Davis and Lowe 1997, Almaguer 1994, Espiritu 1992).

To summarize the racial formation approach: (*a*) It views the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested; (*b*) It understands racial formation as the intersection/conflict of racial "projects" that combine representational/discursive elements with structural/institutional ones; (*c*) It sees these intersections as iterative sequences of interpretations (articulations) of the meaning of race that are open to many types of agency, from the individual to the organizational, from the local to the global.

If we are to understand the changing significance of race at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we must develop a more effective theory of race. The racial formation perspective at least suggests some directions in which such a theory should be pursued. As in the past, racial theory today is shaped by the large-scale sociopolitical processes it is called upon to explain. Employing a racial formation perspective, it is possible to glimpse a pattern in present global racial dynamics.

That pattern looks something like the following: In the period during and after World War II an enormous challenge was posed to established systems of rule by racially defined social movements around the world. Although these movement challenges achieved some great gains and precipitated important reforms in state racial policy, neither the movements nor the reforms could be consolidated. At the end of the century the world as a whole, and various national societies as well, are far from overcoming the tenacious legacies of colonial rule, apartheid, and segregation. All still experience continuing confusion, anxiety, and contention about race. Yet the legacies of epochal struggles for freedom, democracy, and human rights persist as well.

Despite the enormous vicissitudes that demarcate and distinguish national conditions, historical developments, roles in the international market, political tendencies, and cultural norms, racial differences often operate as they did in centuries past: as a way of restricting the political influence, not just of racially subordinated groups, but of all those at the bottom end of the system of social stratification. In the contemporary era, racial beliefs and practices have become far more contradictory and complex. The old world racial order has not disappeared, but it has been seriously disrupted and changed. The legacy of democratic, racially oriented movements[22] and anticolonialist initiatives throughout the world's South, remains a force to be reckoned with. But the incorporative (or if one prefers this term, hegemonic) effects of decades of reform-oriented state racial policies have had a profound effect as well: They have removed much of the motivation for sustained, anti-racist mobilization.

In this unresolved situation, it is unlikely that attempts to address worldwide dilemmas of race and racism by ignoring or transcending these themes, for example by adopting so-called colorblind or differentialist policies, will have much effect. In the past the centrality of race deeply determined the economic, political, and cultural configuration of the modern world. Although recent decades have seen a

[22]For example, the US civil rights movement, anti-apartheid struggles, *SOS-Racisme* in France, the *Movimento Negro Unificado* in Brazil.

tremendous efflorescence of movements for racial equality and justice, the legacies of centuries of racial oppression have not been overcome. Nor is a vision of racial justice fully worked out. Certainly the idea that such justice has already been largely achieved—as seen in the "colorblind" paradigm in the United States, the "non-racialist" rhetoric of the South African Freedom Charter, the Brazilian rhetoric of "racial democracy," or the emerging "racial differentialism" of the European Union—remains problematic.

Will race ever be transcended? Will the world ever get beyond race? Probably not. But the entire world still has a chance of overcoming the stratification, the hierarchy, the taken-for-granted injustice and inhumanity that so often accompanies the race concept. Like religion or language, race can be accepted as part of the spectrum of the human condition, while it is simultaneously and categorically resisted as a means of stratifying national or global societies. Nothing is more essential in the effort to reinforce democratic commitments, not to mention global survival and prosperity, as we enter a new millennium.

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