



THOMAS C. HOLT

THE
PROBLEM
OF RACE IN
THE 21ST
CENTURY

THE PROBLEM OF RACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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**THE PROBLEM
OF RACE
IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY**

THE NATHAN I. HUGGINS LECTURES

FOR
SHOSHANA MICHAELA (B. 1999)
AND IN MEMORY OF
GROVER CLEVELAND HOLT (1917–2000)

Preface

This book began with a paper I prepared some years ago that bore the rather formidable title “How will we explain race in the twenty-first century?” and that I presented in lecture form to graciously responsive audiences at Memphis State University and as the Herbert G. Gutman Memorial lecturer at the City University of New York. I am grateful to Kenneth Goings at Memphis State and Judith Mara Gutman at CUNY for providing those opportunities to try out and develop my ideas. In time I thought better of the title, fearing that audiences might expect me to deliver a definitive answer rather than just another set of hard questions. My question about the future was in fact a heuristic device reflecting the historian’s faith that understanding the past is essential in preparing for the future. Thus when I had an opportunity to deliver a revised version of the paper in 1997, first to the Race and the Reproduction of Racial Ideologies Workshop at the University of Chicago and then to a conference, *Racializing Class and Classifying Race*, hosted by Oxford University, I changed the title to its present noninterrogative form. I am grateful to the auditors and readers in both venues for their sharp and probing questions.

These experiences made it clear that the many themes and problems raised in my talk and in followup questions

could not be adequately covered in a single lecture. An invitation from Henry Louis Gates Jr. and his colleagues at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University to deliver a series of three lectures presented a welcome opportunity to expand upon those themes and questions. Even so, the material constantly threatened to burst the acceptable time limits for a reasonable-length talk. Consequently, although the themes are the same, this book differs in many respects from the lectures: it not only includes more material but also responds to challenging questions from the audience.

This work has benefited immensely from questions and commentary from various readers. My wife Leora Auslander has given me innumerable helpful suggestions, a few of which are acknowledged in the notes, and generally encouraged me to think that this was not a fool's errand. My sincere thanks to friends and colleagues, Julie Saville, Rebecca J. Scott, and Jean-Claude Zancarini, who took time from their own work to help me with mine. Equally crucial to the development of this book have been the many students in my undergraduate and graduate classes on race and racism, first at the University of Michigan and lately at the University of Chicago. The skepticism of the undergraduates toward professorial pronouncements has been salutary, while the impact of the work of the graduates is indicated by my numerous citations of their dissertations and forthcoming books. Aida Donald, my editor at Harvard University Press, facilitated the rapid transition from lectures to a book. Ann Hawthorne, my

manuscript editor, gently and firmly helped me turn “lecture-speak” into readable prose.

I have received time and space to work on this project through generous support from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California, where I began this project, and the John F. Kennedy-Institut für Nordamerikastudien at the Freie Universität in Berlin, where I completed it. I am especially grateful to the latter institution’s director, Knud Krakau, and to Professor Willi Paul Adams for their gracious hospitality and assistance at a critical juncture. My academic leaves have been supported financially by the University of Chicago’s Social Science Division and History Department. Finally, over the years I have received important research assistance from current and former students, Steve Essig, Laurie Green, and Hannah Rosen.

The year that bracketed the culmination of this project also marked the birth of my third daughter and the death of my father. Much of this book is about the crucial transformation occurring during my father’s life and times; undoubtedly much of what I know and say has been shaped by his reflections on those times. My daughter’s birth, practically on the eve of this new century, deepened and intensified the concerns that underlay those reflections, given my growing awareness that the future I write about will be hers.

Berlin
May 2000

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Introduction: Race, Culture, and History

At the dawn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois made a prediction that remains astonishing in its perceptiveness and relevance: "The problem of the twentieth century," he wrote, "is the problem of the color-line,—the relations of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."¹ And indeed issues of group difference—and especially *racialized* differences—have informed most of the major conflicts of the century.

Du Bois's prophecy was necessarily based largely on the nineteenth-century world in which he was born and came of age—a world of colonialism and imperialism, crude labor exploitation, the rise of virulent racist ideologies, and lynching. But within that scenario Du Bois also discerned newer forces, in particular a virtually unchallenged materialism and its desiccation of the human spirit. One of the main themes of his 1903 book, *Souls of Black Folk*, was a challenge to the emerging monopoly-capitalist world order that sought to make material self-interest the primary value of human existence. His prophecy, then, was grounded in his analysis of his past and keen observation of his present.

One might well ask, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, whether we could do as well. Given our understanding of the world in which we have come of age and our reading of our future on the basis of our present existence, what kind of role can we predict that race will play in that future? And if we are unable to offer such an analysis, what does that very inability suggest about our

confidence in that future? What does it suggest about our ability to plot a course of resistance and reformation? What is our ability to imagine solutions?

Will the concepts and tools we have developed for understanding the racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries be adequate for the twenty-first? Should we even expect them to be? I think not; and here I will attempt to offer both reasons why not and some suggestions about the issues and factors we must consider if we are to re-frame our analyses of racial phenomena in such a way as to make them more adequately reflect the future world(s) we are in the process of making.

Why is the way we are accustomed to thinking about race and racism inadequate to the evolving world? In popular and academic discourse, racism is conventionally understood to refer to the hostility one group feels toward another on the basis of the alleged biological and/or cultural inferiority of that other. Among its manifestations are exploitation of the labor and/or property of that other (as in slavery and colonialism), exclusion of that other from participation in public life and institutions (as in segregation and disfranchisement), and massive physical violence against that other (as in lynching). There is no doubt that all these phenomena continue to characterize relations among racialized groups in America and elsewhere. I would argue, however, that such phenomena do not capture all aspects of the contemporary situation and, more

importantly, may miss significant changes under way. There are *new* anomalies, *new* ambiguities, and a *new* ambivalence in contemporary life that our standard definitions of race and racism simply cannot account for, and which even render them somewhat anachronistic.²

To begin with one of the more familiar and recent of these anomalies, we had in America just recently a situation wherein a black man, Colin Powell, could be seriously and credibly considered as a viable Republican challenger for the presidency. The point here is not whether he might have won or not—there is plenty of room for skepticism about that³—but rather that the very idea of his successfully contesting the presidential election was not received with overwhelming scorn or patronizing sounds as had been the case just a decade before, when Jesse Jackson first ran for the Democratic nomination. Instead, mere speculation about a Powell candidacy was met with plans by monied men to raise the considerable funds needed to wage a successful presidential campaign.⁴

On one level, this development could—perhaps even does—represent real change in both white attitudes and the racial climate of this country. But what is most interesting about the Powell phenomenon is its anomalous relationship to the conditions of life and the life chances of most black people. Indeed, even while speculation about whether a black former military officer of the highest rank would run for president was most intense, other members of that same military brutally murdered a black couple in

North Carolina. We learned later that these murders were part of a ritual initiation into one of the neo-Nazi cells organized on many military bases.⁵ The arbitrariness, the randomness, the casualness of this snuffing out of black life evokes memories of the high tide of lynching in the 1890s; it suggests racial regression, not progress.

One response to this anomaly might be simply to dismiss the phenomenon of Powell's potential electability as president as chimerical, to say—as many blacks indeed do—that *nothing* has changed. I believe that view is as wrong and shortsighted as thinking that the millennium of racial peace is just around the corner. What are not to be missed in this scenario are its contradictions and incoherence; like a cracked mirror portraying a fragmented image, “all odds and evens.” What we need to explain are why and how Powell's credibility as a presidential candidate and the North Carolina murders can coexist. The simultaneous idealization of Colin Powell and demonization of blacks as a whole (especially the politically motivated demonization of large numbers of black women as “welfare queens” by members of Powell's own party) is replicated in much of our everyday world.

Reflect for a moment on an admittedly fictional—though fact-based—scenario. What if the rock music star Michael Jackson, at the height of his popularity a few years ago, had visited one of the all-white neighborhoods of New York City or Chicago? He almost certainly would have been met by screaming, wild mobs of white youths.

They would have been screaming their adoration of him and his music. If they had torn his clothing, the objective would have been to get a valuable trophy from a living icon of American popular culture. Fast-forward to a few weeks later. A black man answering an ad offering a car for sale or a young black male on his bicycle ventures into that same neighborhood. The crowd that welcomed Michael Jackson gathers again. It is screaming. But this time, it screams for blood.⁶

We don't have to look far for more such narratives of contradiction and incoherence in contemporary racial phenomena. I cite these two—one from the world of high politics and one from the everyday world of popular culture—merely to suggest the broad terrain of the problematic I wish to address. We need to begin rethinking our explanations of race, because such phenomena raise profound questions about how we are to recognize racism and the racial, about what kinds of transformations are currently under way in the racial regime we inhabit, and thus about how we are to fashion a response.

RECOGNIZING RACE AND RACISM

Much contemporary commentary on race and racism seems directed at containing these concepts within fairly narrow and clearly recognizable frames. Indeed, some of these analyses appear more concerned to limit the scope of available legal remedies by narrowly (and anachronisti-

cally) defining what can legitimately be called “racially motivated.” Others are well-intentioned efforts by careful scholars trying to get a clear “fix” on the object of study; for them, admitting all manner of invidious acts of distinction under a racial designation risks losing focus and analytic efficacy.⁷ However, it is clear that a great number of palpably race-related phenomena in contemporary life cannot be comprehended within definitions that seek to sustain such sharp distinctions.

Perhaps part of the problem in contemporary analyses of race is that they address their subject head-on: that is, they begin by attempting to define the concept and to catalogue its substantive content. This approach encounters problems at both ends of the analytic spectrum. Defining racism in terms of the old idea of biological inferiority, for example, leaves unaddressed a lot of patently racist practices in contemporary life. Moreover, we quickly discover in such a catalogue that some of the same ideas and tropes have circulated through racist discourse from time immemorial, a fact that leaves us just a short step away from conceiving racism as a timeless or innate human quality. On the other hand, such a catalogue necessarily entails trying to corral or contain a concept that by its very nature is parasitic and chameleonlike.

In the following pages I hope to show not only that such ambiguous boundaries and seeming atemporality have characterized race and the racial for a very long time—perhaps even since its inception—but also that