

WHITE RACISM

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The Basics

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To Melvin Sikes and Santiago Godoy-Guardia

PREFACE

In the United States white racism is a centuries-old system intentionally designed to exclude Americans of color from full participation in the economy, polity, and society. Today, racial prejudices and ideologies still undergird and rationalize widespread white discrimination against people of color. We realize that this view of a racialized and white-dominated America is not popular among most white analysts and commentators as we move toward the twenty-first century. More popular is the belief that African Americans and other people of color have made great progress, so much so that white racism is no longer a significant barrier in most of their lives. Indeed, few whites are aware of how important racism is to their own feelings, beliefs, thinking, and actions.

When we presented the outline of this book to the editors of another major New York publisher, they complained that our book did not deal with “black racism.” From the perspective we take in this book, black racism does not exist. We conceptualize racism in structural and institutional as well as individual terms. Racism is more than a matter of individual prejudice and scattered episodes of discrimination. There is no black racism because there is no centuries-old system of racialized subordination and discrimination designed by African Americans to exclude white Americans from full participation in the rights, privileges, and benefits of this society. Black (or other minority)

racism would require not only a widely accepted racist ideology directed at whites but also the power to systematically exclude whites from opportunities and rewards in major economic, cultural, and political institutions. While there are black Americans with antiwhite prejudices, and there are instances of blacks discriminating against whites, these examples are not central to the core operations of U.S. society and are not part of an entrenched structure of institutionalized racism that can be found in every nook and cranny of this country. Indeed, they are frequently defensive or oppositional responses to pre-existing white racism.

What is often referred to as "black racism" consists of judgments made about whites by some black leaders or commentators to the effect that "no white people can be trusted" or "the white man is the devil." But these critical ideas or negative prejudices are not the equivalent of modern white racism. The latter involves not just individual thoughts but also widely socialized ideologies and omnipresent practices based on entrenched racialized beliefs. The prejudices and myths used to justify antiblack actions are not invented by individual perpetrators, nor are they based only on personal experience. These patterns of highly racialized thought are embedded in the culture and institutions of a white-centered society.

Racialized ways of feeling and acting are widely disseminated by parents, peers, the media, and the educational system. They are passed along from generation to generation. Whites can avail themselves of this racialized thinking as needed. Racial categories form part of this Eurocentric culture's off-the-shelf taxonomies that classify and organize certain features of the social world into a coherent whole. In this sense, racial categories form part of the social blueprint whites use to orient their actions. The broad availability of racial categories, prejudices, and myths helps to explain, to an important extent, how many new immigrants to the United States quickly adopt negative images of African Americans. Many immigrants from Europe and other parts of the globe hold antiblack prejudices and stereotypes even before they set foot in this country. These beliefs and myths are imbibed from U.S. movies, television programs, and publications, which are now viewed in every country around the globe. The U.S. version of modern white racism is more than a national phenomenon, for it now encircles the globe.

This book probes the nature of certain cases that many have thought to be examples of white racism. Looking at these cases, we examine sets and series of events that show what many white Americans believe and how they sometimes act in regard to African American men, women, and children. We look at who these whites are and make a distinction between active participants in racialized actions, those who are aco-

lytes, and those who are but passive participants. We examine some of the causes of white racism and probe deeply its often nuanced character. As we will see, racialized actions by whites are not always motivated by racial hatred. Fear, ignorance, a sense of personal vulnerability, the desire to carry out the orders of others, and jealousy can propel whites to engage in or passively acquiesce in such racialized practices. Many whites passively consent to racial rituals. Note, for example, the fact that in the mid-1990s the battle flag of the old Confederacy is still flown by whites over several state capitols, in spite of the great insult and pain this symbol of slavery and racial oppression delivers to African Americans. Many whites have acquiesced in such acts of symbolic violence.

In this book we examine a wide range of misconceptions and myths about African Americans and about whites themselves—what we call “sincere fictions.” Usually unfeigned and genuine, the negative beliefs about and images of African Americans provide the make-believe foundation for white dominance and supremacy. Yet the sincere fictions of whites encompass more than negative images of the out-group; they also involve images of one’s self and one’s group. The key to understanding white racism is to be found not only in what whites think of people of color but also in what whites think of themselves.

In this book we focus centrally on white racism as it targets and exploits African Americans because that racism is an archetype for other subsequent patterns of white treatment of people of color. In the case of the United States the basic foundation for nearly 400 years of subsequent racial incorporation and oppression by European Americans was set in place in the 1600s in the importation, subordination, and exploitation of African slaves. One can certainly argue that this archetype of African oppression was contemporary with, if not predated by, the archetypal model of genocide that white Europeans developed in the process of stealing land from Native Americans. Both these systems of oppression were central to the creation of colonial and U.S. racism. In the early centuries of European colonization Native Americans had their lands taken from them by chicanery and force. However, generally speaking, most Native Americans were not incorporated into the white economy and society but instead were killed off in genocidal actions, driven westward beyond the boundaries of white interests, or restricted to segregated enclaves called reservations.

In contrast, African Americans became a central part of the new Euro-American communities. Their lives were soon governed by a well-developed racist ideology and by a legally protected system of oppression reaching across all societal institutions. The white economy, polity, society, values, and religion, and even the white selves, were constructed and reconstructed with the black slave—and after emancipation the black “semi-slave”—as a central point of reference.

At base, modern racism is, to quote the late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, "slavery unwilling to die."

White racism and the black struggle against it have shaped the character not only of the founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, but also of a huge body of law and much social practice over the intervening centuries. From the 1600s to the 1990s, a majority of white Americans have held antiblack prejudices, often webbed into a full-fledged racialized ideology, and have played an active or passive role in implementing an extensive and institutionally buttressed set of discriminatory practices. It is within this racialized framework that certain other groups have been incorporated, constructed, and oppressed. Subsequent non-European immigrants such as the Chinese and Japanese immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or Mexican immigrants since the early 1900s have also been defined by many whites as somehow subhuman, noncitizens without rights, or second-class citizens. Immigrant groups not of European background have found themselves defined and treated by whites more like African Americans than like Euro-American whites. Constructed and incorporated in a centuries-old racist framework, they have often become "Chinks," "Japs," "gooks," and "greasers." Eventually, some in these nonblack groups have been able to improve their racialized status within the white-dominated society, but only because whites have come to see them as "better" in cultural or visual-racial terms than African Americans. Even so, "better" has never meant full social, economic, and political equality with Euro-Americans.

White-on-black racism is thus a—if not *the*—crucial paradigmatic case of racism historically and in the present. Other types of white-on-minority racism are very important, and there is a great need to eradicate them all. Yet we believe that they cannot be adequately understood until we understand deeply the character and history of white racism as it has targeted African Americans.

Conceptually, this book takes a starting point different from many other studies. Often a basic assumption permeating analyses of U.S. racial problems is that such relations are a zero-sum racial game, such as in the common white notion that when blacks gain, whites lose. We argue that such a zero-sum assumption is generally unwarranted. In some cases all can win, while in others all can lose. In the past and in the present racial oppression has required very large expenditures of time, energy, and resources, not only on the part of the black victims of white racism but also on the part of whites themselves. Certainly, this time and energy could have been much more productively spent in self- or societal improvements and advancements. In a very real sense, all the victims and perpetrators are losers.

If white racism is so wasteful, why does it still persist? The answer lies perhaps in the fact that the system of racial subordination and exploitation is so taken for granted; it is now nearly 400 years old and is woven into every major institution in this society. The U.S. racism we accent in this book began as a system to provide a source of chained labor for European American slavemasters in both the southern and the northern colonies. Ever since, most whites (but some much more than others) have benefited in a variety of ways from this racist system, especially in the short run. Moreover, racial stereotypes and prejudices are useful for whites in explaining why certain people of color do not have as much or do as well as whites across multiple areas of the society. Racist notions of genetic or cultural inferiority help explain why there are great inequalities in a society with egalitarian ideals. Racist actions have brought ill-gotten resources and benefits to many white Americans. Yet few whites realize the heavy price that they, their families, and their communities have paid and will pay for this institutionalized racism. White Americans have paid greatly in the form of their ignorance and fears, in human contributions and achievements sacrificed, in the failure to create a just and egalitarian society, in the resistance and lashing out of the oppressed, and in the fundamental ideals and egalitarian morality thus betrayed. In our view U.S. society cannot afford white racism in the long run, for it may well destroy this society as we know it sometime in the next century.

Focusing on the massive character of the racialized waste that is basic to this nation should be useful and critical for initiating a reinvigorated debate on the solutions for white racism. In this book we are very much concerned with solutions for the archetypal white-on-black racism. We are under no illusion that its lessening or elimination will be easy. In the past, many have tried to lessen or eradicate racism, and these attempts have often been limited in effect or have been outright failures. Historically, conservative solutions for racial dilemmas deny there is a structural problem and focus on reforming the victims or their cultural values. Liberal solutions tend to tackle symptoms or deal with truncated aspects of the problem of racism with modest reforms or civil rights laws and regulations that are at best weakly enforced. Both the conservative and liberal agendas stress education of the oppressed, thereby taking much of the blame for racial inequalities off of white Americans and white society.

Much more radical action is needed to eradicate white racism and create an egalitarian, multicultural society. We conclude this book with an eclectic set of proposals on where to go from here. Some are modified extensions of liberal solutions, such as our call for consciousness-raising on matters of racism, while others are more radical, such as our call for reparations for African Americans and for a new consti-

tutional convention. Our analysis is not just about the negative character of white racism and its impact on black and white Americans but also about the ideas and values on which effective solutions must be based. A key question is, "On whose terms are we going to live together, if we are to live in harmony?"

At this point in U.S. history, the majority of whites do not want to live according to the egalitarian terms necessary for full racial justice and harmony. All Americans coming to mutually agreeable terms constitutes what some social scientists have called "social rationality." Here we call for a new socio-racial rationality. Reaching this socio-racial rationality will require the education or re-education of the majority of white Americans not only in regard to U.S. racial-ethnic history but also in regard to the massive costs of white racism for the black and other minority victims of racism—and for whites themselves, their children, and U.S. society as a whole. Beyond this education, there must be social and political action to restructure completely the basic institutions of the United States. White racism must be extirpated at its roots in every major institution. A start on U.S. restructuring would involve the serious and vigorous enforcement of existing civil rights laws and other antidiscrimination regulations. Beyond this antiracist action, we call for substantial governmental reparations to African Americans and for a new constitutional convention, this time one where all Americans—not just north European males with property—can debate and hammer out a new way of living together in a truly just, democratic, and egalitarian society.

In our view there is not much time left to reach a new multicultural, egalitarian, truly democratic framework for this society. The three major black rebellions in Miami in the 1980s, the huge uprising in Los Angeles in 1992, and the many other black and other minority riots and uprisings since the 1960s have come in a period in U.S. history when the message of a "declining significance of race" has been regularly delivered by white leaders from the "bully pulpits" in the White House, business conferences, academia, and the media. According to this decline-of-racism theory, black uprisings should not happen, for there is no reason for them, given the "great progress" that African Americans have allegedly made. Yet happen they did, with a cost in the Los Angeles case alone of more than 50 lives and a billion dollars in property damage.

Racial problems that a majority of whites pretend do not exist cannot be successfully overcome. We invite our readers to look white racism in the face and see it for the wasteful American Holocaust that it is—and that it will continue to be.

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WHITE RACISM

A Sociology of Human Waste

White racism is one of the most difficult problems facing the United States today and is the most consequential for the nation's future. White racism has the potential to array white and black Americans against each other in ways that could eventually devastate the social and political structure of the United States. Witness the events of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia or Soviet Union, where members of ethnic factions have killed one another with less apparent justification than some black victims of recurring racism might have to lash out violently against their white oppressors.

The days of urban rebellion in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992, when some African and Latino Americans did lash out at a cost of many lives and vast property damage, provide but one example of the violent consequences of racial oppression. Anger and rage at white racism lay behind the Los Angeles uprising and the many other black rebellions that have taken place since the 1930s. Referring to the likelihood of additional urban uprisings following the Los Angeles riot, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Henry Cisneros argued that "like piles of dry wood with red-hot coals underneath, scores of American cities can ignite" because of America's "dirty secret": racism.¹

We demonstrate in this book that the open "secret" of white racism is a system of institutionalized human waste that this society cannot afford. We depart from much mainstream research on racial relations to focus on specific events in particular places and on those whites whose actions have a negative impact on African Americans.

Traditional discussions often treat the system called white racism as a zero-sum game of power and resources, a view that assumes a scarcity of critical societal resources for which racial groups inevitably contend. We depart from this narrow perspective and argue for the existence of a *surplus* of societal resources and human talents that white racism allows to be routinely squandered and dissipated. On reflection, many whites can recognize some of the waste of black talent and resources brought about by discriminatory barriers, but few realize how great this loss is for African Americans. Even fewer whites realize the huge amount of energy and talent that whites themselves have dissipated in their construction of antiblack attitudes and ideologies and in their participation in racial discrimination. In this book we explore the impact of such racism on white as well as on black Americans by emphasizing the dissipation of the energies and talents of discriminators as well as of victims. We believe that U.S. society is paying a heavy price in material, psychological, and moral terms for the persistence of white-generated racism.

Racial relations scholar bell hooks argues that approaches emphasizing the hurt whites experience from racism risk "obscuring the particular ways racist domination impacts on the lives of marginalized groups," for many people "benefit greatly from dominating others and are not suffering a wound that is in any way similar to the condition of the exploited and oppressed."² We agree that the costs are far greater for the oppressed. Our argument about the costly character of racism recognizes that black and other minority victims of racial oppression typically pay a *direct, heavy, and immediately painful* price for racism, while white discriminators and onlookers usually pay a *more indirect and seldom recognized* price. In addition, for whites the benefits accruing from racism to a varying degree offset the negative consequences. Clearly the net cost of racism is not equal across racial groups, but nonetheless the cost for all is great.

In this book we argue that racist practices can be eradicated only by massive efforts to demythologize the structures of our society. Debates about modest remedial programs are necessary and useful but provide little practical hope for Americans interested in bringing about "liberty and justice for all." It is hard to create a successful program for action when most whites are unaware of the losses they experience from racism and fail to see what they could gain from its destruction. The false ideas that fuel antiblack propensities and ac-

tions often go unexamined because whites not only fear blacks but also fear changes in racial relations. Many whites see nothing positive in the integration of blacks into their organizations and communities because they view life as a zero-sum game in which black gains mean great white losses. For example, a number of the white residents of Dubuque, a city examined in chapter 2, felt that an early 1990s diversity plan to recruit black newcomers would create serious job competition for many white workers. This fiction fueled antiblack actions, but in reality the very small number of black workers to be recruited would have threatened only very few if any local jobs. This kind of zero-sum thinking leads many white Americans to take imaginary threats very seriously. Unexamined myths of this sort help to keep America balkanized along racial lines. If we are interested in racial change in the United States, we must reconceptualize the problem of white racism.

Denying the Reality of White Racism

Until civil rights laws were passed during the Lyndon Johnson administration in the 1960s, most African Americans faced blatant discrimination that was legally prescribed or permitted. Few had the resources to vigorously counter this racism, and the legal system offered little support. In the years following the civil rights revolution, as state-enforced segregation was demolished, many felt optimistic about the future. Black people began moving into many formerly forbidden areas of U.S. society, and whites began to encounter a greater black presence in historically white public facilities, workplaces, businesses, churches, schools, and neighborhoods.

However, the civil rights revolution came to a standstill in the 1980s, and many African Americans now believe that the country and its government are moving backward in the quest for racial justice.³ Presidential use of the White House as a "bully pulpit" for conservative political agendas during the Reagan and Bush years of the 1980s and early 1990s was particularly devastating to racial relations. Federal civil rights enforcement programs were weakened significantly in this period. The political denial of white racism made its way into intellectual circles and the mass media, where the concept of the "declining significance of race" became fashionable. Since the mid-1970s many influential commentators and authors have argued or implied that white racism is no longer a serious, entrenched national problem and that African Americans must take total responsibility for their own individual and community problems.

A majority of white Americans in all social classes, including jurists, scholars, and commentators, now appear to believe that serious racism

is declining in the United States; that black Americans have made great civil rights progress in recent decades; and that blacks should be content with that progress. Whites see widespread discrimination in most institutional arenas as a thing of the past. In particular, many whites believe that the black middle class no longer faces significant discrimination and is thriving economically—indeed more so than the white middle class. Whites typically view problems of the black underclass as the central issue for black America and believe that that class's condition has little to do with discrimination. (For evidence on white views, see chapter 7.) The white notion that any black person who works hard enough can succeed is even reflected in white reactions to the Bill Cosby show described by researchers Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis. Many whites felt the series, which portrayed a successful black upper-middle-class family and became the highest-rated sitcom on national television during the 1980s, showed a “world where race no longer matters.” Jhally and Lewis noted that this view of the show enabled whites to “combine an impeccably liberal attitude toward race with a deep-rooted suspicion of black people.”⁴

One aspect of the contemporary denial of racism is the common white refusal to notice or comment on racial differences, especially regarding programs to eradicate racial discrimination. Toni Morrison has described this escapism eloquently: “Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. . . . It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. . . . According to this logic, every well bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse.”⁵

The Reality of Racism

The substantial white consensus on the decline of racism is not based on empirical evidence. On the contrary, research shows that black men and women still face extensive racial discrimination in all arenas of daily life. A brief overview of the current racial scene is appropriate at this point to set the frame for our analysis in subsequent chapters. Recent in-depth studies have documented continuing antiblack discrimination, ranging from blatant acts reminiscent of the legal segregation period to subtle and covert forms that have flourished under the conditions of desegregation. The belief in the declining significance of race cannot be reconciled with the empirical reality of racial discrimination. Great anger over white racism can be found today in every socioeconomic group of black Americans, from millionaires to day laborers.⁶