

# PORTRAITS OF WHITE RACISM

David T. Wellman

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# **Portraits of White Racism**

In loving memory of my mother, Peggy Wellman,  
and my friend, Bob Starobin:

They were brave and genuine people for whom  
thought without action was inexcusable,  
and action without thought ineffective.

Their footsteps are huge.

# Foreword

*by Robert Blauner*

David Wellman's book is a study of racial consciousness. It is about the conflicts of the 1960s as experienced by ordinary white Americans. Until then most whites outside the South could escape an awareness of involvement in racism because white and black lives so rarely touched. Suddenly, race exploded on the domestic scene, and Americans of African descent began to impinge on white lives. Blacks could no longer be confined to the margins of whites' perceptual screens, for these formerly "invisible" men and women had seized history's center stage.

Not only the big voices were heard — the sounds of ghetto revolt and calls for black power — but the little voices, previously silent, were heard on the job, in the classroom, and on the streets. Most white people at least squirmed a little as comfortable "resolutions" of racial questions were shaken up. The new black consciousness — certainly not monolithic, with its various shades and hues — forced a greater self-consciousness about race, and many larger questions were raised about social justice and how we all live our lives.

Although Professor Wellman is a sociologist, he illuminates these social processes out of the texture of personal experience much like the fine novelist. In this book you

will meet five people of diverse backgrounds who grappled in unique ways with the racial crisis. First is Gene Danich, Wellman's one-man rebuttal to the Archie Bunker stereotype of the American worker. Danich is a longshoreman and a member of the ILWU, a fifty-percent black union. The racial electricity of his story is intensified by the probing questions of interviewer Alex Papillon, a black fellow worker. Danich is a study in contradictions. Although his baptismal introduction to dark-skinned people while a raw recruit in the Marines was a black fist in the mouth, he believes that police *are* really brutal to blacks. At the same time that he was admiring the Black Panthers and their project of arming the black community, he "fairly" could not tolerate the aggressive, "arrogant" stance of Stokely Carmichael and seemingly would have done anything to get rid of him. I believe the sketch of Danich is the most brilliant chapter in the book and should be required reading for all college students who have been assigned Seymour Martin Lipset's classic portrait of the worker as an authoritarian, simplistic thinker. (There are similar portraits. Reportedly Professor Lipset has since disclaimed this position.)

Next we encounter Darlene Kurier painfully trying to make sense of the changing racial climate of the 1960s. When she took a job as an assistant in a Head Start program black people became prominent in her life. As Wellman deftly characterizes her poignant dilemmas and confusions: "Just as she was coming to evaluate black people as individuals, they demanded to be treated as a group. When she came to recognize that black people needed equal opportunities, they were demanding political power. As she began to locate the issues of discrimination in individual prejudice, black people were speaking of the entire society as a racist one. At the time she recognized that blacks needed help, they didn't want any." Because she is unusually honest

about her feelings and because she evidently struggled with her prejudices and tried to listen to her black co-workers, the pathos of always being out of synchronization with the changing times is all the more underscored.

Dick Wilson, on the other hand, experiences none of the doubts and confusions that beset Kurier; this businessman's views of law, order, and procedures for social redress are indeed "authoritarian." Born in Virginia in extreme poverty, his whole life has been a struggle to escape his origins, to achieve the solid middle-class status provided by his position as supervisor of a large manufacturing plant. Whereas black people were distant and irrelevant when he was growing up, in 1968 (when the interview took place) they made up a sizeable proportion of his work force. Seven of these workers took time off the job to lend solidarity to Huey Newton, the Black Panther Minister of Defense, who was on trial for the murder of a white police officer. Wilson was furious, and frustrated because the racial climate prevented him from invoking the discipline in which he so strongly believed. C. Wright Mills said that sociology should examine the interplay of public events and private troubles, but how often do we have an opportunity to see this in action? *Portraits of White Racism* is dense with such social history: the interviews overflow with references to the assassination of King, to Malcolm X, Carmichael and Black Power, the Panthers, and above all "the riots."

John Harper, the next actor in this drama, is also remarkably sure of himself and of the correctness of his viewpoints. An unusually articulate scion of an old and prosperous California family, he achieved wealth and financial security from an earlier career as an engineering entrepreneur. He is a financial manager for an East Bay city and deals with black people as employees and consumers of the city services. Dedicated to nineteenth-century principles of individualism, hard work, and testing one's mettle, he is



especially antagonistic to black studies programs, which he feels undermine society's values. Harper professes a "color-blind" attitude about race, and like so many of the others in this book, social class — and not race — is the criterion he would use to exclude people from his personal world of friendship and neighborhood.

Finally we meet Roberta, a young, almost pampered middle-class teenager who brought her romantic idealization of black people all the way from Louisiana to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. Roberta exemplifies how many young whites in the counterculture identified with blacks and black culture perhaps as an antidote to their own sense of inner emptiness. Romantic rebel turned hippie, her views of "spades" went through a series of changes as she was more and more "hassled in the Haight." The story of Roberta's loss of innocence is at the same time a glimpse of the relations between white hippies and urban blacks in San Francisco in the 1960s.

The interviews from which Wellman's portraits are drawn cover a vast range of topics, focusing particularly on the history of the subjects' encounters with people of color. The ultimate interest was to cut through conventional truisms, stereotypes, and political rhetoric in order to confront the depth and complexity of actual feelings about blacks and other minorities. Wellman and his field workers were looking for what Winthrop Jordan has called the "sense of difference" between whites and blacks, and for how their white respondents perceived Afro-Americans. Beyond this Wellman was curious about the person's mental picture of American society and its race relations. To what extent do people recognize racial hierarchy, inequality, and injustice? And, if recognized, how are they explained? This led him to the question of how white people come to terms with their *racial privilege*, that is, the advantages they all share that are denied members of

minority groups because skin color is so fateful in our society. For example, to what degree do white people recognize their complicity in, their participation in, and personal responsibility for, the subordination of people of color?

The case study method is especially suited to deal with these hard and sensitive questions. Quantitative research — like opinion surveys — requires that answers and positions be formulated with some precision. On the level of depth and nuance where Wellman is working, however, the very essence of racial consciousness is ambiguity and contradiction. Qualitative research, whether based on observation, the clinical or focused interview, or the life-history, makes it possible to confront the special features and subtleties of each particular case, and to view the person or the social process in some larger context or situation.

It is true that life-history interviews are difficult and indeed frustrating to analyze because they are not as standardized as other techniques. Wellman's interviews emphasize each person's unique story and life themes, as well as his or her "racial" history. With Gene Danich the larger context was his tortuous work history and his finally successful search for that "freedom job"; in the case of Roberta it was her search for a community of love. Although this lack of comparable data limits certain kinds of analysis, it makes it possible to view the person as a total entity, and in particular to link specific attitudes (for example, responses to the riots) to larger themes of personality and consciousness. Thus we can understand why Gene Danich is able to empathize with angry blacks taking to the streets when we see how violence has been such a prominent, upfront theme in his own life. Roberta's response to rioting is clearly linked to her own precarious sense of public safety — she was living on the fringes of San Francisco's Fillmore District. Similarly, the powerful aversions expressed by Wilson and

Harper make more sense when we see them in the context of their generally rigid socio-political views and their apparently successful mastery of their own aggressive impulses. Contrast this with the more conventional surveys of the 1960s that gave us reams of public opinion data on how population cross-sections felt about ghetto insurrections — their causes, possible justifications, and appropriate responses — but that come to us in stark, mechanical percentages that inevitably abstract the data from the framework of personal and political experience.

Roberta and her co-respondents were interviewed as part of a larger study of racism and racial attitudes conducted at the University of California in the late 1960s. I was the principal investigator of this research, which means that I wrote the grant proposal and provided many of the guiding ideas. David Wellman was the sparkplug of the study, which means he did most of the work and assumed the major responsibilities, especially for what turned out to be more than 300 depth interviews. (More than 200 of these interviews were with blacks and do not play a direct part in this book.)

Our project sacrificed randomness in drawing its sample in order to maximize rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Although a conscientious attempt was made to systematically include a demographic cross-section, there is no way to know whether Wellman's findings are representative of a larger population. The author has discussed these issues at length in Chapter 2.

*Portraits of White Racism* is based on the 107 interviews with white people that Wellman and his fellow field workers collected. Even though only five of these persons appear directly in the book the others form the backdrop against which the foreground figures come to life. For it was in poring over the tape-recorded transcripts of the entire sample that Professor Wellman formulated his theoretical

approach to the phenomenology of white racism. The specific five "Portraits" were then selected because they were, in a sense, *exemplary* cases. Either because a respondent was particularly insightful and articulate or because she or he had experienced conflicts of race especially intensely, or for whatever reason — these subjects exemplified themes that were common to a much larger group of respondents. Thus, their very particularity highlighted generic social realities. Needless to say, another criterion of selection was diversity. Women and men, young and old, working-and middle-class are included.

Each of the portrait chapters opens with a brief prologue which places the interview in context. Here Wellman vividly exposes the inner life of the research project, its day-to-day problems. Then comes the heart of the matter, the sketch of the informant based on a creative synopsis of the interview materials. Finally, in the process of interpreting the interview, he introduces his own ideas and theories of racism. These ideas come in the epilogue, after we have experienced the interview on its own terms. The reader who has already gotten a sense of Roberta or John Harper or Gene Danich can make his or her own judgments as to whether or not the author's theoretical leaps are firmly grounded in the empirical materials, whether or not they cast fresh light on the subjects. Like Robert Coles and Studs Terkel, David Wellman lets people speak for themselves.

After they have spoken, David Wellman goes to work on them. Like the good sociologist he is — and my aim here is to question the sociological method — our author approaches with considerable skepticism Roberta's vision of the community of love, Harper's Protestant ethic values, Kurier's pathos, and Wilson's ideals of right living. He wants to chip away at them, to point out their contradictions and inconsistencies, to show how consistently self-

serving they are, how they mask racial privilege and cloud the true structure of society. It is true that people's beliefs, in some very general way, are connected to their positions in society. But beliefs and their seriousness vary from one person to another, indeed from one time of life to another. They can be canned from ready-made formulae easily available in the cultural/ideological supermarket. Or they can be, with all their confusions and contradictions, the product of hard-fought battles to make sense out of our lives. These are the extremes. The five who sat for David Wellman's portraits, like most of us I suppose, are somewhere in between, but I experienced their views more as deeply-felt attempts to comprehend social reality than as ideology, rationalization, or the automatic playback of public opinion. Although I have exaggerated a tendency in Wellman's approach to underscore my own polemic, I think the author comes closest to such reductionism in the epilogue to Darlene Kurier. Whereas he seems especially hard on her, he seems to take Gene Danich's ideas most seriously. I read this as an expression of a certain working class bias in Wellman, intimations of which may also be found in the comparison of middle class and working class racism in Chapter 8.

One of the most engaging – and important – aspects of this book is its frankness and openness. With the exception of ethnographic work, it is difficult in much of social science to get a sense of the concrete human situation in which the drama of research is played out: the final report seems so “reified,” so cut off from the actual point of data production, often from personal experience itself. Wellman's remarkably candid discussion of methodology in Chapter 2 goes far to demystify social research, as he shows the difference between textbook expectations and the way a real-life sociological study unfolded. In the prologue to Roberta's chapter, he speculates about why

# Preface

This book is about white racism. Unlike most books on the subject, however, it is not about prejudice. For reasons that I make clear in the first chapter, I find that concept troublesome: It does not adequately explain the pervasiveness and subtlety of racist beliefs in American life. Thus, instead of assuming that racist sentiments are expressed as prejudice, I explore an alternative: Racism can mean culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities. Viewed through these lenses, racism need not be restricted to the obvious hostilities expressed by bigots, nor found solely among the ranks of lower- and working-class people. It is seen to be more pervasive, existing throughout the American class structure.

I am suggesting that racism is much more subtle, elusive, and widespread than sociologists have acknowledged. Part of the reason they have been unable to see racism in this light is conceptual: They have not “looked” for these expressions of it. The other part is methodological: Traditional instruments used by sociologists in large-scale surveys are not yet sensitive to these manifestations of racism. The structured questions asked in highly systematic research designs also assume a great deal of knowledge about the

her interview "worked," thus dismissing the closely guarded professional secret that most interviews don't. Later he notes that Darlene Kurier wasn't one of Hardy Frye's best interviews. He tells us what he thinks of his staff, of his own weaknesses and hangups and those of Alex, Hardy, Lincoln, Ed, — what they missed as well as what they got. When you read this book you can see that interviewing is no neutral encounter, but a problematic, often painful human situation which changes the interviewer as well as the respondent. In talking to Dick Wilson, for example, Dave Wellman shed some of his own prejudices against business people. This gives this study a flavor of authenticity that is all too rare in sociology.

*Portraits of White Racism* is a sensitive and multifaceted book. The reader can expect to engage in some provocative dialogues with the author and his research subjects, dialogues that will help clarify his or her own relationship to the system of racial privilege in this country.

subject *before* the questions are posed. Since we know relatively little about that face of racism that I am exploring, traditional sociological methodologies are not much help; in fact they probably get in the way of understanding.

Thus my research departs from orthodox procedures. This book is grounded in five “sociohistories,” case studies based on in-depth, qualitative interviews. The case studies reflect five different ways in which white Americans defend racial advantage; they show how people without prejudice continue to think in terms that maintain the racial status quo. Focusing intensely on a few people may limit the extent to which I can generalize, but it enhances my ability to show the subtleties and complexities of racism and to place racism within social, cultural, and biographical contexts. These contexts are crucial to my argument. As long as racial sentiments are evaluated independently of the contexts within which they occur, only the most obvious kinds of racism are detectable: the prejudiced kinds.

The arguments made in this book are not based on statistical “proof”: I do not pretend to measure how widespread the racism I am analyzing is, nor do I assess the quarters in which it is most prominent. The purpose of this book is not to show how racism is distributed throughout the population. In fact, since the data were not collected in a random sample, that is not possible. Thus, I have neither the basis nor the reason to use statistical evidence. What this book does provide are the tools and the perspective with which to see racism in sentiments that are usually considered nonracist. That *is* possible with the data at hand.

Writing is a solitary project, books are not. However, most of the people who contribute to the making of a book never see their names on title pages. This book is the product of many different efforts. Were it not for two people in particular it would never have seen the light of



day. Professor Robert Blauner taught me a great deal about race relations. Through his example I have also learned irreverence, although not disrespect, for traditional ways of looking at the world; he has given me the courage to try new formulations. Bob read this book in many forms; his comments always pushed me farther than I thought was possible. As a friend and colleague he has always been around when I needed to be told “enough,” or “more,” or “great,” or “not quite.” He made this book possible in yet another way: He was principal investigator of the research project that collected the data on which it is based.

The other person I feel especially indebted to is Professor Jan Marie Newton. There is not one draft of this book she has not seen and put long hours of work into; there is not an idea in it which we have not discussed at great length. Trying to please Jan is not easy; but that is what I have tried to do. The extent to which I achieve theoretical and literary clarity is largely due to her influence. Jan is more than a teacher and colleague: She is one of my most intimate friends. She administered emotional first aid when it was required and infected me with spirit when I was caught with my confidence down. She also taught me how to relax and celebrate when there was cause. Without her love and friendship this book would have been impossible.

Other people have been instrumental in the making of this book. Throughout the writing of it Professor Troy Duster has been an insightful critic, a persistent advocate, and a dear friend; sometimes simultaneously, always at the right time. Professor Jan E. Dizard carefully read draft after draft, persistently but not belligerently insisting I refine one or another idea. When I did not, he did not give up; when I did, he pushed anyway. Professor Steven Deutsch read beginning drafts; he has offered me encouragement, constructive criticism, and a friendly ear. Professor Richard Hill read Chapter 2 with a magnifying