



THE CHANGING TERRAIN OF
RACE AND ETHNICITY



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INEQUALITIES THAT ENDURE?
RACIAL IDEOLOGY, AMERICAN POLITICS, AND THE
PECULIAR ROLE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES



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AS PART OF research on the intersection of poverty, crime, and race, I conducted two focus groups in a major eastern city in early September 2001, just prior to the tragic events of September 11. The dynamics of the two groups, one with nine white participants and another with nine black participants, drove home for me very powerfully just how deep but also just how sophisticated, elusive, and enduring a race problem the United States still confronts. An example from each group begins to make the point that the very nature of this problem and our vocabularies for discussing it have grown very slippery, very difficult to grasp, and therefore extremely difficult to name and to fight.

First let's consider the white focus group. In response to the moderator's early question, "What's the biggest problem facing your community?" a young working-class white male eagerly and immediately chimed in, "Section 8 housing." "It's a terrible system," he said. The racial implications hung heavy in the room until a middle-aged white bartender tried to lighten things a bit by saying:

All right. If you have people of a very low economic group who have a low standard of living who cannot properly feed and clothe their children, whose speech patterns are not as good as ours [and] are [therefore] looked down upon as a low class. Where I live most of those people happen to be black. So it's generally perceived that blacks are inferior to whites for that reason.

The bartender went on to explain: "It's not that way at all. It's a class issue, which in many ways is economically driven. From my perspective, it's not a

racial issue at all. I'm a bartender. I'll serve anybody if they're a class [act]." At this, the group erupted in laughter, but the young working-class male was not finished. He asserted, a bit more vigorously:

Why should somebody get to live in my neighborhood that hasn't earned that right? I'd like to live [in a more affluent area], but I can't afford to live there so I don't. . . . So why should somebody get put in there by the government that didn't earn that right?

And then the underlying hostility and stereotyping came out more directly when he said: "And most of the people on that program are trashy, and they don't know how to behave in a working neighborhood. It's not fair. I call it unfair housing laws."

Toward the end of the session, when discussing why the jails are so disproportionately filled with blacks and Hispanics, this same young man said: "Blacks and Hispanics are more violent than white people. I think they are more likely to shoot somebody over a fender bender than a couple of white guys are. They have shorter fuses, and they are more emotional than white people."

In fairness, some members of the white group criticized antiblack prejudice. Some members of the group tried to point out misdeeds done by whites as well. But even the most liberal of the white participants never pushed the point, rarely moved beyond abstract observations or declarations against prejudice, and sometimes validated the racial stereotypes more overtly embraced by others. In an era when everyone supposedly knows what to say and what not to say and is artful about avoiding overt bigotry, this group discussion still quickly turned to racial topics and quickly elicited unabashed negative stereotyping and antiblack hostility.¹

When asked the same question about the "biggest problem facing your community," the black group almost in unison said, "Crime and drugs," and a few voices chimed in, "Racism."² One middle-aged black woman reported: "I was thinking more so on the lines of myself because my house was burglarized three times. Twice while I was at work and one time when I returned from church, I caught the person in there."

The racial thread to her story became clearer when she later explained exactly what happened in terms of general police behavior in her community:

The first two robberies that I had, the elderly couple that lived next door to me, they called the police. I was at work when the first two robberies occurred. They called the police two or three times. The police never even showed up. When I came in from work, I had to go . . . file a police report. My neighbors went with me, and they had called the police several times and they never came. Now, on that Sunday when I returned from church and caught him in my house, and

the guy that I caught in my house lives around the corner, he has a case history, he has been in trouble since doomsday. When I told [the police] I had knocked him unconscious, oh yeah, they were there in a hurry. Guns drawn. And I didn't have a weapon except for the baseball bat, [and] I wound up face down on my living room floor, and they placed handcuffs on me.

The moderator, incredulous, asked: "Well, excuse me, but they locked you and him up?" "They locked me up and took him to the hospital."

Indeed, the situation was so dire, the woman explained, that had a black police officer who lived in the neighborhood not shown up to help after the patrol car arrived with sirens blaring, she felt certain the two white police officers who arrived, guns drawn, would probably have shot her. As it was, she was arrested for assault, spent two days in jail, and now has a lawsuit pending against the city. Somehow I doubt that a single, middle-aged, churchgoing white woman in an all-white neighborhood who had called the police to report that she apprehended a burglar in her home would end up handcuffed, arrested, and in jail alongside the burglar. At least, I am not uncomfortable assuming that the police would not have entered a home in a white community with the same degree of apprehension, fear, preparedness for violence, and ultimate disregard for a law-abiding citizen as they did in this case. But it can happen in black communities in America today.³

To say that the problem of race endures, however, is not to say that it remains fundamentally the same and essentially unchanged. I share the view articulated by historians such as Barbara Fields (1982) and Thomas Holt (2000) that race is both socially constructed and historically contingent.⁴ As such, it is not enough to declare that race matters or that racism endures. *The much more demanding challenge is to account for how and why such a social construction comes to be reconstituted, refreshed, and enacted anew in very different times and places.* How is it that in 2001 we can find a working-class white man who is convinced that many blacks are "trashy people" controlled by emotions and clearly more susceptible to violence? How is it that a black woman defending herself and her home against a burglar ends up apprehended as if she were one of the "usual suspects"? Or cast more broadly, how do we have a milestone like the *Brown* decision and pass a Civil Rights Act, a Voting Rights Act, a Fair Housing Act, and numerous acts of enforcement and amendments to all of these, including the pursuit of affirmative action policies, and yet still continue to face a significant racial divide in America?

The answer I sketch here is but a partial one, focusing on three key observations. First, as I have argued elsewhere and elaborate in important ways here, I believe that we are witnessing the crystallization of a new racial ideology here in the United States. This ideology I refer to as *laissez-faire racism*. We once confronted a slave labor economy with its inchoate ideology of racism

and then watched it evolve in response to war and other social, economic, and cultural trends into an explicit Jim Crow racism of the de jure segregation era. We have more recently seen the biological and openly segregationist thrust of twentieth-century Jim Crow racism change into the more cultural, free-market, and ostensibly color-blind thrust of laissez-faire racism in the new millennium. But make no mistake—the current social structure and attendant ideology reproduce, sustain, and rationalize enormous black-white inequality (Bobo and Kluegel 1997).

Second, race and racism remain powerful levers in American national politics. These levers can animate the electorate, constrain and shape political discourse and campaigns, and help direct the fate of major social policies. From the persistently contested efforts at affirmative action through a historic expansion of the penal system and the recent dismantling of “welfare as we know it,” the racial divide has often decisively prefigured and channeled core features of our domestic politics (Bobo 2000).

Third, social science has played a peculiar role in the problem of race. And here I wish to identify an intellectual and scholarly failure to come to grips with the interrelated phenomena of white privilege and black agency. This failure may present itself differently depending on the ideological leanings of scholars. I critique one line of analysis on the left and one on the right. On the left, the problem typically presents as a failure of sociological imagination. It manifests itself in arguments that seek to reduce racialized social dynamics to some ontologically more fundamental nonracialized factor. On the right, the problem is typically the failure of explicit victim-blaming. It manifests itself in a rejection of social structural roots or causation of racialized social conditions. I want to suggest that both tactics—the left’s search for some structural force more basic than race (such as class or skill levels or child-rearing practices) and the right’s search for completely volitional factors (cultural or individual dispositions) as final causes of “race” differences—reflect a deep misunderstanding of the dynamics of race and racism. Race is not just a set of categories, and racism is not just a collection of individual-level anti-minority group attitudes. Race and racism are more fundamentally about sets of intertwined power relations, group interests and identities, and the ideas that justify and make sense out of (or challenge and delegitimize) the organized racial ordering of society (Dawson 2000). The latter analytic posture and theory of race in society is embodied in the theory of laissez-faire racism.⁵

ON LAISSEZ-FAIRE RACISM

There are those who doubt that we should be talking about racism at all. The journalist Jim Sleeper (1997) denounces continued talk of racism and racial bias as mainly so much polarizing “liberal racism.” The political scientists Paul Sniderman and Edward Carmines (1997) write of the small and diminishing

effects of racism in white public opinion and call for us to “reach beyond race.” And the linguist John McWhorter (2000) writes of a terrible “culture of victimology” that afflicts the nation and ultimately works as a form of self-sabotage among black Americans. Even less overtly ideological writers talk of the growing victory of our Myrdalian “American Creed” over the legacy of racism. Some prominent black intellectuals, such as the legal scholar Randall Kennedy (1997), while not as insensitive to the evidence of real and persistent inequality and discrimination, raise profound questions about race-based claims on the polity.

These analysts, I believe, are wrong. They advance a mistaken and counterproductive analysis of where we are today, how we got here, and the paths that we as a nation might best follow in the future. In many respects, these analysts are so patently wrong that it is easy to dismiss them.

Let’s be clear first on what I mean by “racism.” Attempts at definition abound in the scholarly literature. William Julius Wilson (1973, 32) offers a particularly cogent specification when he argues that racism is an “an ideology of racial domination or exploitation that (1) incorporates belief in a particular race’s cultural and/or inherent biological inferiority and (2) uses such beliefs to justify and prescribe inferior or unequal treatment for that group.” I show here that there remains a profound tendency in the United States to blame racial inequality on the group culture and active choices of African Americans. This is abundantly clear in public opinion data (Kluegel and Smith 1986), and it is exemplified by more than a few intellectual tracts, including McWhorter’s *Losing the Race* (2000). Closely attendant to this pattern is the profound tendency to downplay, ignore, or minimize the contemporary potency of racial discrimination (Kluegel 1990). Again, this tendency is clear in public opinion and finds expression in the scholarly realm in the Thernstroms’ book *America in Black and White* (1997). These building blocks become part of the foundation for rejecting social policy that is race-targeted and aims to reduce or eliminate racial inequality. In effect, these attitudes facilitate and rationalize continued African American disadvantage and subordinated status. Our current circumstances, then, both as social structure and ideology, warrant description and analysis as a racist regime. Yet it is a different, less rigid, more delimited, and more permeable regime as well.

Laissez-faire racism involves persistent negative stereotyping of African Americans, a tendency to blame blacks themselves for the black-white gap in socioeconomic status, and resistance to meaningful policy efforts to ameliorate U.S. racist social conditions and institutions. It represents a critical new stage in American racism. As structures of racial oppression became less formal, as the power resources available to black communities grew and were effectively deployed, as other cultural trends paved the way for an assault on notions of biologically ranked “races,” the stage was set for displacing Jim Crow racism and erecting something different in its place.

I have taken up a more complete development of the historical argument and the contemporary structural argument elsewhere (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bobo and Smith 1998).⁶ What is worth emphasizing here is, first, the explicit social groundedness and historical foundation of our theoretical logic—something that sets this theory of racial attitudes apart from notions like symbolic racism. Although not directly inspired by his work, our theoretical logic is a direct reflection of ideas articulated by the historian Thomas Holt (2000, 21–22). As he explains: “Racial phenomena and their meaning do change with time, with history, and with the conceptual and institutional spaces that history unfolds. More specifically they are responsive to major shifts in a political economy and to the cultural systems allied with that political economy.”

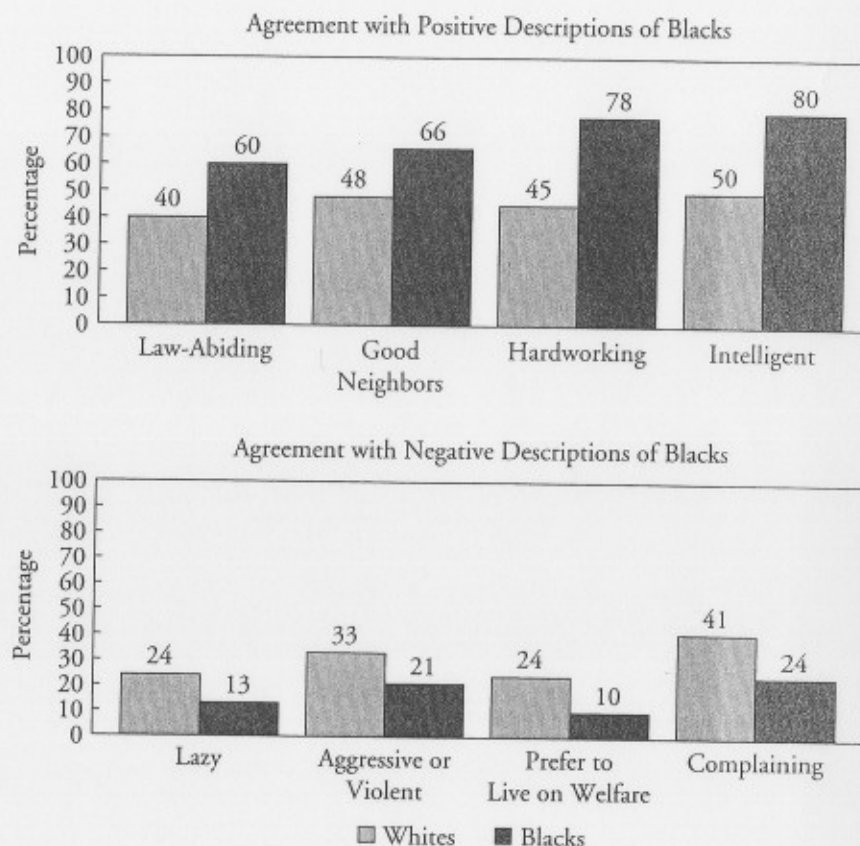
The second point to emphasize here is that this is an argument about general patterns of group relations and ideology—not merely about variation in views among individuals from a single racial or ethnic category. As such, our primary concern is with the central tendency of attitudes and beliefs within and between racial groups and the social system as such, not within and between individuals. It is the collective dimensions of social experience that I most intend to convey with the notion of *laissez-faire* racism—not a singular attitude held to a greater or lesser degree by particular individuals. The intellectual case for such a perspective has been most forcefully articulated by the sociologist Mary R. Jackman (1994, 119). We should focus an analysis of attitudes and ideology on group-level comparisons, she writes, because doing so

draws attention to the structural conditions that encase an intergroup relationship and it underscores the point that individual actors are not free agents but caught in an aggregate relationship. Unless we assume that the individual is socially atomized, her personal experiences constitute only one source of information that is evaluated against the backdrop of her manifold observations of the aggregated experiences (both historical and contemporaneous) of the group as a whole.

The focus is thus more on the larger and enduring patterns and tendencies that distinguish groups than on the individual sources of variation.

With this in mind, I want to focus on three pieces of data, the first of which concerns the persistence of negative stereotypes of African Americans. Figure 2.1 reports data from a national Web-based survey I recently conducted using eight of Paul Sniderman's stereotype questions (four dealing with positive social traits and four dealing with negative social traits) (Sniderman and Piazza 1993).⁷ Several patterns stand out. It is easier for both blacks and whites to endorse the positive traits when expressing views about the characteristics of blacks than the negative traits. However, African Americans are always more

FIGURE 2.1 STEREOTYPE ITEMS, BY RACE

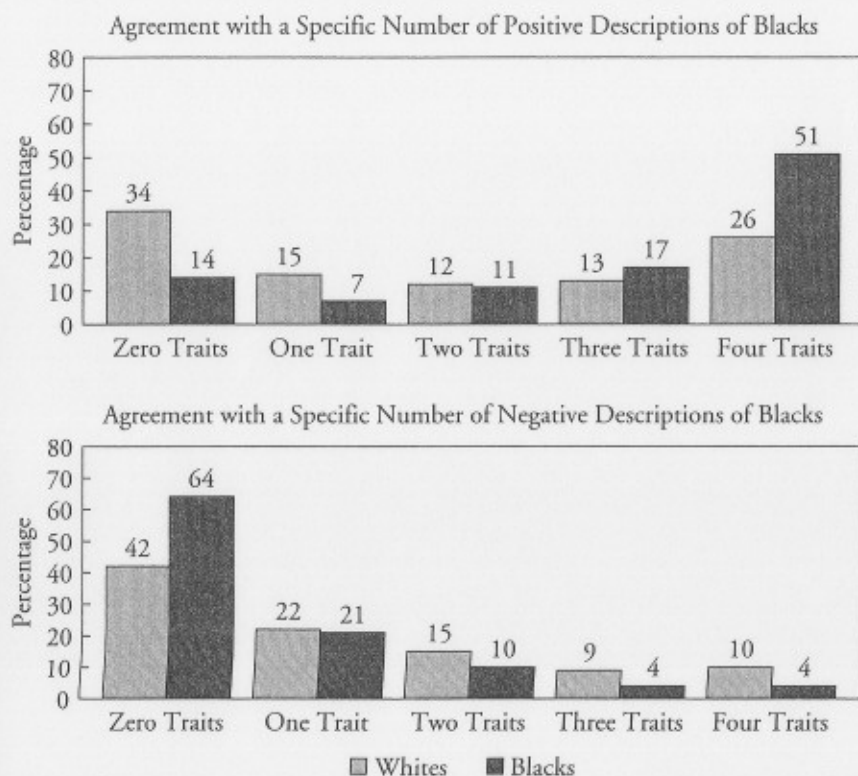


Source: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Study (2001).

favorable and less negative in their views than whites. Some of the differences are quite large. For instance, there is a thirty-percentage-point difference between white and black perceptions on the trait of intelligence and a thirty-three-percentage-point difference on the “hardworking” trait.

A fuller sense of what these patterns mean for group differences can be seen in figure 2.2. It provides a cumulative assessment of the positive and negative ratings. Here we see that whites are more than twice as likely as blacks to have attributed none of the positive traits to blacks and that blacks are essentially twice as likely as whites to attribute all four positive traits to members of the group. On the flip side, nearly two-thirds of blacks reject all of the negative

FIGURE 2.2 SUMMARY STEREOTYPE MEASURES, BY RACE



Source: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Study (2001).

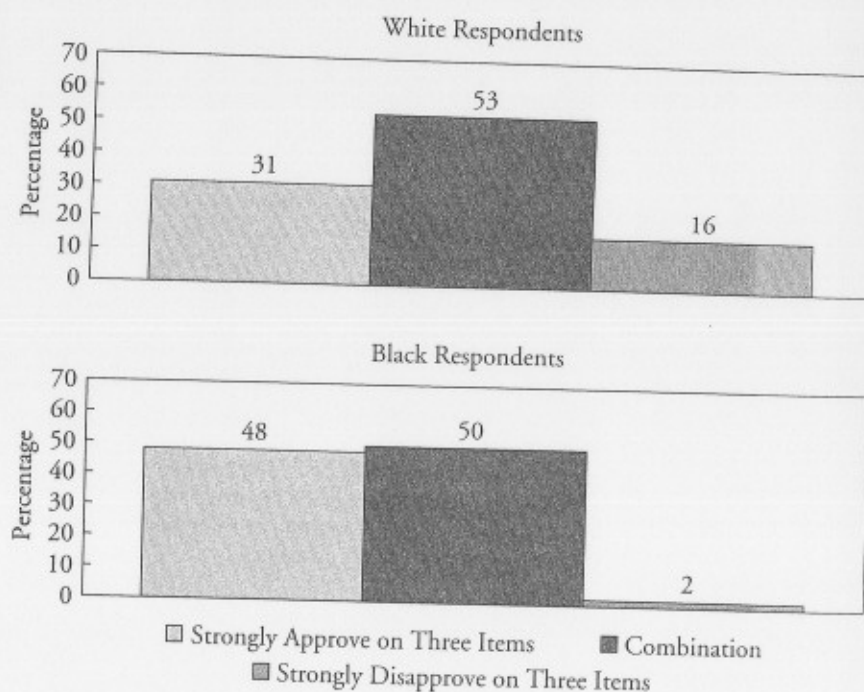
stereotypes of the group, in contrast to the 58 percent of whites who accept at least one negative trait perception and the nearly one-third who accept three or more.

Negative stereotypes of African Americans are common, though not uniform, and to a distressing degree they exist among both blacks and whites and presumably influence perceptions and behaviors for both groups.⁸ However, there is a sharp difference in central tendency within each group, in predictable directions. One cannot escape the conclusion that most whites have different and decidedly lesser views of the basic behavioral characteristics of blacks than do blacks themselves. And that generally these patterns indicate that African Americans remain a culturally dishonored and debased group in the American psyche.

Stereotypes as measured here are arguably more cognitive in nature and tell us a bit less about racism as an active force than do more overt expressions of social distance. We asked three questions about interracial relationships in a 1997 national telephone survey.⁹ The questions dealt with general approval of black-white dating and marriage, and black-white marriages of family members. To provide a strong assessment of the extent of non- or antiracist thinking, we present the data in three broad categories: we distinguished those who gave the highest "strongly approve" response across all three items from those who gave the consistent overtly racist response of "strongly disapprove" and treated everyone else as in the middle. As figure 2.3 shows, large fractions of whites and blacks end up in the middle category under this scheme. Perhaps not too surprising is the higher percentage of African Americans in the consistently "strongly approve" category (48 percent versus 31 percent).

It is the committed racist category to which I most want to draw attention. Barely 2 percent of African Americans fall into this category, compared to

FIGURE 2.3 WHITE AND BLACK LEVELS OF APPROVAL OF INTERRACIAL ITEMS



Source: National Omnibus Survey (1997).

16 percent of whites (or slightly less than one in six). Given that these are nationally representative data, given that they yield a ratio of committed racists, comparing black to white, of eight to one, and assuming that these figures probably underestimate (particularly among whites) racist leanings, these numbers point to a serious ongoing problem of racism.

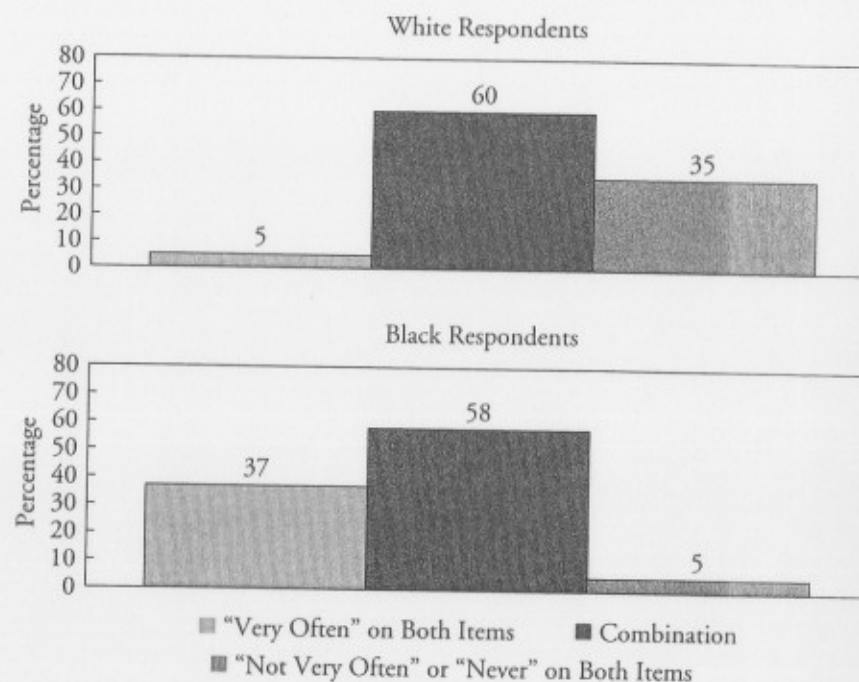
Alternatively, these data could be interpreted as showing the essential ambivalence of racial attitudes today, especially among most whites. This is the view adopted by Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2000) in their very important book, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. I want to suggest that, sociologically speaking, the view that most whites are ambivalent on race, while politically strategic, is also probably a good deal too generous. There are two reasons for this conclusion that are tightly interrelated. First, I think genuine ambivalence requires a fairly high level of what Howard Schuman once called "sympathetic identification" with the underdog (Schuman and Harding 1963). Most of the cultural and social structural pressures in the United States still arguably tilt in an antiblack direction. So, second, without strong underlying sympathetic identification, the extant patterns of economic inequality, segregation by race, and political polarization and the long-standing failures of American political culture (discussed later) heavily weight the scale toward ambivalence that usually (if not invariably) resolves itself on the side of acting against, recoiling from, or disparaging blacks rather than actively, sympathetically embracing blacks.

More specifically, we can produce some empirical evidence on this point. In the same national survey we included the distinguished social psychologist Tom Pettigrew's (1997) intergroup affect measures. These questions ask how often the respondent has felt sympathy for blacks and how often he or she has felt admiration for blacks. Again, to pose a strong test, we focus our attention on those respondents who said "very often" in response to both questions. As figure 2.4 shows, a vanishingly small fraction of whites fall into this category, only 5 percent, while fully 37 percent of African Americans do, for a ratio of more than seven to one. Moreover, fully 35 percent of whites consistently said that they "not very often" or "never" felt sympathy or admiration for blacks. Viewed as central tendencies within major social groups—not individuals—these results bespeak the likelihood of a profound and widespread tendency on the part of whites to regard blacks as "the other." Many individuals may indeed be ambivalent. Nonetheless, the larger social context and climate remain seriously doubtful of the full humanity of African Americans. At a minimum, the immediate sense of commonality assumed in much of the current "color-blind" discourse is simply not in evidence here.

ON AMERICAN POLITICS

As a historic fact and experience as well as a contemporary political condition, racial prejudice has profoundly affected American politics. A wide body of

FIGURE 2.4 WHITE AND BLACK AFFECTS TOWARD AFRICAN AMERICANS



Source: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Study (2001).

evidence is accumulating to show that racial prejudice still affects politics. Black candidates for office typically encounter severe degree of difficulties securing white votes, partly owing to racial prejudice (Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990; Kaufman 1998; Callaghan and Terkildsen 2002). There is some evidence, to be sure, that the potency of racial prejudice varies with the racial composition of electoral districts and the salience of race issues in the immediate political context (Reeves 1997; Kaufman 2003).

Moreover, political candidates can use covert racial appeals to mobilize a segment of the white voting public under some circumstances. For example, the deployment of the infamous Willie Horton political ad during the 1988 presidential campaign heightened the voting public's concern over race issues. It also accentuated the impact of racial prejudice on electoral choices and did so in a way that did not increase concern with crime per se (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 1997). That is, what appears to give a figure like Willie Horton such efficacy as a political symbol is not his violent criminal behavior

per se, but rather his being a violent black man whose actions upset a racial order that should privilege and protect whites.

Major social policy decisions may also be driven by substantially racial considerations. The political psychologists David Sears and Jack Citrin (1985) make a strong case that antiblack prejudice proved to be a powerful source of voting in favor of California's historic property tax reduction initiative (Proposition 13), a change in law that fundamentally altered the resources available to government agencies.

On an even larger stage, the very design and early implementation of core features of the American welfare state were heavily shaped by racial considerations. Robert Lieberman (1998) has shown that the programs that became Social Security, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and unemployment insurance were initially designed to either exclude the great bulk of the black population or leave the judgment of qualification and delivery of benefits to local officials. The latter design feature of AFDC (originally ADC) had the effect in most southern states of drastically curtailing the share of social provision that went to African Americans. As Lieberman (1998, 216–17) explains:

Any possibility for broader racial inclusion in social policy evaporated before the ink from the president's pen was dry on 14 August 1935; the moment Franklin Roosevelt affixed his signature to the Social Security Act, a particular racial compromise became law—a compromise not of generalities but of specifics. A new set of rules was in place that would define for a generation and more who was in and who was out of American social provision. African-Americans were decidedly out, but the terms on which they were excluded, the institutions designed to keep them out, differed in their racial porousness. . . . Although different policies affect race relations in different ways—by challenging or buttressing particular legal, political, economic, or social relations—American social policies share a legacy of race-laden institutional structures. The ability to exclude African-Americans from benefits has been a central factor in the adoption of national policies, and the parochialism of other policies has often effectively restricted African-American participation.

Lieberman shows that it was white southern legislators who insisted upon many of these racialized features of the early American welfare state and that they often spoke directly about the impact of the policies on blacks and labor relations in the South. It was mainly early black civil rights organizations, he also shows, that argued against these policies and political compromises with racism.

There are good reasons to believe that the push to “end welfare as we know it”—which began as a liberal reform effort but was hijacked by the political right and became, literally, the end of welfare as we had known it—was just

as surely impelled by heavily racial considerations. The political sociologist Martin Gilens (1999) has carefully analyzed white opinion on the welfare state in the United States. Some features of the welfare state, he finds, lack an overtone of black dependency (such as Social Security) and enjoy high consensus support. Other programs (AFDC, food stamps, general relief) are heavily racialized, with much of the white voting public regarding these programs as helping lazy and undeserving blacks.

Indeed, the fundamental alignment of the U.S. national political parties has been centrally driven by a racial dynamic (Frymer 1999; Glaser 1996). Over the past thirty-five years we have witnessed a fundamental transformation in the Democratic and Republican party system, a transformation that political scientists call realignment. The more the Democratic Party was seen as advancing a civil rights agenda and black interests—in a manner that clearly set them apart from the Republican Party—the more race issues and race itself became central to party affiliations, political thinking, and voting in the mass white public (Carmines and Stimson 1989). What was once a solid white Democrat-controlled South has thus shifted to a substantially white Republican-controlled South.

The end result of all of these patterns, simply put, is that African Americans do not enjoy a full range of voice, representation, and participation in politics. Black candidates, particularly if they are identified with the black community, are unlikely to be viable in majority white electoral districts. Even white candidates who come to be strongly associated with black interests run the risk of losing many white voters. As a consequence, party leaders on both sides have worked to organize the agenda and claims of African Americans out of national politics. In particular, the national Democratic Party, which should arguably reward its most loyal constituents in the black community, instead has often led the way in pushing black issues off the stage (Frymer 1999; Edsall and Edsall 1991). As the political scientist Paul Frymer (1999) has explained, party leaders do so because they are at risk of losing coveted white “swing voters” in national elections if they come to be perceived as catering to black interests. Thus is the elite discourse around many domestic social policies, and their ultimate fate, bound up in racial considerations.

Against this backdrop it becomes difficult, if not counterproductive, to accept the widely shared view that American democracy is on an inexorable path toward ever-greater inclusivity and fuller realization of its democratic potential. In the context of such enduring and powerful racialization of American politics, such an assumption is naive at best.

There is an even more incisive point to be made. The presumption of ever-expanding American liberalism is mistaken. For example, the Pulitzer Prize winning-historian Joseph Ellis (2001) writes of the terrible “silence” on the subject of slavery and race that the “founding fathers” *deliberately* adopted. They waged a Revolutionary War for freedom, declared themselves the

founders of a new nation, and in very nearly the same moment *knowingly* wedded democracy to slave-based racism. The philosopher Charles Mills (1997) extends the reach of this observation by showing the deep bias of Enlightenment thinkers toward a view of those on the European continent—whites—as the only real signatories to the “social contract.” Others, particularly blacks, were never genuinely envisioned or embraced as fully human and thus were never intended to be covered by the reach of the social contract.

Considerations of this kind led the political theorist Rogers Smith (1993) to suggest that the United States has not one but rather multiple political traditions. One tradition is indeed more democratic, universalistic, egalitarian, and expansive. But this tradition competes with and sometimes decisively loses out to a sharply hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist civic tradition (see also Gerstle 2001; Glenn 2002). The ultimate collapse of Reconstruction following the Civil War and the subsequent gradual development of *de jure* segregation and the Jim Crow racist regime provide one powerful case in point.

ON THE PECULIAR ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Mainstream scholars on the left tend to treat race as a categorical designation that affects the outcomes that matter to us for reasons that have nothing to do with race as a sociological phenomenon. If African Americans have lower employment chances or earnings than whites, this is not a function of race but rather of purely “statistical discrimination” or other factors, such as different levels of education and skill, that somehow “explain” the extraneous influence of race. Since we do not believe in race as an inherent biological or primordial cultural factor that produces social outcomes, there must be other nonracial social conditions that account for any effect of race on outcomes that matter. The analog to this line of reasoning in examinations of political attitudes and public opinion is the treatment of African Americans as an out-group attitude object, an object toward which individual whites have been socialized to hold more or less negative attitudes.

To the credit of liberal social analysts, both approaches reject biological and inflexible cultural understandings of race and racial differences. Yet both approaches fail to come to grips with the condition of embedded white privilege and the import of constrained but quite real black agency. That is, there are sociologically meaningful “imagined communities,” communities of identity as well as of typical residence, interaction, family connection, and larger interest defined as black and white that exist in relation to one another in the United States. And indeed, race has been used at various points and in various ways as one of the fundamental principles in organizing an array of conditions that define the relationship between those sociological units or imagined communities. Hence, its effects are not reducible to other, putatively more fundamental causes.

Let me be more specific by taking an example from the realm of racial attitudes and public opinion. The theory of symbolic racism contends that a new form of antiblack prejudice has arisen among whites reflecting a blend of early learned traditional values (for example, individualism and the Protestant work ethic) and early learned negative feelings and beliefs about blacks.¹⁰ This new attitude is an amalgamation. It consists of a resentment of demands made by blacks, a resentment of special favors received, especially from government, by blacks, and a denial of the contemporary relevance of discrimination. These views constitute a coherent attitude, an attitude not bearing any functional relation to white advantage or privilege or to real-world black challenge and resistance to white privilege. Rather, the attitude is a learned ideation of centrally unreasoned, emotion-laden content. When political issues arise that make race and African Americans salient, this underlying psychological disposition becomes the basis of whites’ political response. Hence, prejudice *intrudes* into politics.

What I want to suggest is that prejudice is *in and of* politics—not an ideational intrusion of the individual’s emotionally expressive and irrational impulses upon the political sphere (Bobo and Tuan, forthcoming). As I have argued elsewhere, intergroup attitudes are not principally individual-level judgments of like and dislike (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bobo and Smith 1998). Instead, following the inspiration of Herbert Blumer (1958), I argue that these attitudes centrally involve beliefs and feelings about the proper relation between groups. Racial attitudes capture aspects of the preferred group positions and those patterns of belief and affect that undergird, mobilize as needed, and make understandable the prevailing racial order.

These remarks have specific meaning with regard to the conceptualization and measurement of a notion like symbolic racism. Beliefs and feelings about whether blacks receive special treatment, favors, or an unfair advantage or have leaders and a political agenda that demand too much are not merely ventilations of atomistic feelings of resentment or hostility. These are highly political judgments about the status, rights, and resources that members of different *groups* are rightly entitled to enjoy or make claims on.

This difference in conceptualization is an important one and is directly linked to my concern with white privilege and black agency. From the vantage point of symbolic racism theory, there is no instrumental or rational objective whatsoever behind the intrusion of prejudice into politics. Whites are neither seeking the maintenance of privilege nor responding in any grounded fashion to real social, political, and economic demands arising from the black community and its leaders. Instead, the theory holds, a mixture of emotions, fears, anxieties, and resentments combines with important social values to occasion a hostile response when African Americans and their concerns are made politically salient (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears, van Laar, and Kosterman 1997).

Although not intended as such, this view trivializes African Americans’ political activism and struggle that put issues like desegregation, antidiscrimination,

affirmative action, and increasingly the matter of reparations on the national political agenda. Real political actors pursued deliberate strategies and waged hard-fought legal, electoral, and protest-oriented battles to advance the interests of black communities. These actions had powerful effects on the larger dynamics of politics and public opinion (Lee 2002). And however imperfect and imbued with exaggerated apprehensions they may have been, white Americans nonetheless perceived and responded to these very substantively political struggles (Bobo 1988). Hence, to classify white attitudes and beliefs about black demands, black leadership, and black responses to disadvantage as some sort of "pre-political," completely emotional ideation is to trivialize black America, to infantilize white America, and to skirt serious engagement with the many powerful "wages" that still accrue to whiteness.

Empirically and in terms of measurement, this argument raises serious doubts about how to understand the meaning of responses to the questions used to tap symbolic racism. For example, my own research suggests that when many whites say that blacks (or any other minority group) are "taking unfair advantage of privileges given to them by the government," these are not vague resentments (Bobo 1999). These sentiments are almost certainly not precisely calculated assessments of real risks and actual losses, but they are still expressly political judgments about the quality of life and about important resources, at once material and symbolic, that groups may get from the state.

In particular, whites who answer in the affirmative to this sort of survey question frequently speak of their tax dollars and their work effort going to support others, in the concrete language of a zero-sum resource transfer. A good illustration of the point comes from the cultural sociologist Michele Lamont's important new book, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (2000, 60–61). She writes of one of her subjects:

... Vincent is a workhorse. He considers himself "top gun" at his job and makes a very decent living. His comments on blacks suggest that he associates them with laziness and welfare and with claims to receiving special treatment at work through programs such as affirmative action. He says: "Blacks have a tendency to . . . try to get off doing less, the least possible . . . to keep the job where whites will put in that extra oomph. I know this is a generality and it does not go for all, it goes for a portion. It's this whole unemployment and welfare gig. A lot of the blacks on welfare have no desire to get off it. Why should they? It's free money. I can't stand to see my hard-earned money [said with emphasis] going to pay for someone who wants to sit on his ass all day long and get free money."

As Lamont (2000, 62) concludes about a number of the white working-class men she interviewed: "They underscore a concrete link between the perceived dependency of blacks, their laziness, and the taxes taken from their own paychecks."

This is not an isolated finding of Lamont's in-depth interviews. For example, the sociologist Mary Waters (1999, 177) observed a very similar pattern among the white managers and employers she studied. She writes:

Most white respondents were much more able to tap into their negative impressions of black people, especially "underclass" blacks whom they were highly critical of. These opinions were not just based on disinterested observation. There was a direct sense among many of the whites that they personally were being taken advantage of and threatened by the black population.

The language used is one of traits (laziness) and violations of values (hard work and self-reliance) coupled with moral condemnation, but the group comparison, sense of threat, and identity-engaging element is equally clear. Indeed, as the experimental social psychologist Eliot Smith (1993, 308–9) has persuasively argued, it is exactly this blend of important group identity and resource threat to the group that *should* be emotionally arousing: "These items and the definition all involve appraisals of an outgroup as violating ingroup norms or obtaining illegitimate advantages, leading to the emotion of anger." Conceptualizing such responses as the ventilation of resentment distorts the critical point that "the focus in the model advanced here is not the intrinsically negative qualities attributed to blacks themselves (which are the theoretical key in concepts of prejudice as a negative attitude) but *appraisals of the threats posed by blacks to the perceiver's own group*" (309, emphasis in original).

The substance of the theory and the interpretation of the measures of symbolic racism thus suffer from a failure of sociological imagination. The theory pushes out of analytical view the real and substantial linkage between the facts of white privilege and the facts of active black challenge to it. In their place, the theory gives us but the phantasms of racial resentments in the minds of individual whites. These phantasms somehow—but apparently unintentionally—enter politics, take note of black agitation and disruption, and then release in a spasm of reaction against race-targeted social policies. I would like to suggest that there is something decidedly wrong with the theory and conceptualization, even though the many sentiments identified in the concepts of symbolic racism and racial resentment are indeed at the heart of the contemporary political struggle over race (Krysan 2000).

On the right side of the political spectrum, the example I wish to draw attention to is the mounting speculation, most prominently offered by Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom (1997), that the pervasive patterns of racial segregation we observe in the United States are a function of "black self-segregation." In this case, African Americans are credited with agency, but that agency is said to be exercised in a manner that continues to disadvantage blacks. Only this time it is blacks themselves who, by choosing a self-handicapping preference,

are responsible. The argument is a troubling one for anyone who believes that neighborhoods vary in school quality, safety, social services and amenities, and all that goes into the phrase "quality of life." It says that blacks are, perforce and of their own free will, placing racial solidarity above social mobility and a better quality of life.

The failure here is twofold. First, the Thernstroms' argument is contingent on the rejection of compelling empirical evidence of racial bias and discrimination in the housing market (for an authoritative review, see Charles 2003). It is clear that a powerful racial hierarchy continues to permeate thinking about communities, neighborhoods, and where to live. Using experimental data, Camille Z. Charles and I show that white Americans are systematically more open to residential contact with Asians and Latinos than with blacks—holding every other consideration constant (Zubrin and Bobo 1996). Several studies have now made it clear that antiblack racial stereotypes are direct predictors of willingness to live in more integrated communities (Farley et al. 1994; Bobo and Zubrin 1996; Charles 2000).

These results are consistent with other demographic and behavioral data (Yinger 1998). Researchers at the State University of New York at Albany document the very small changes in high rates of black-white residential segregation between 1990 and 2000. Indeed, HUD auditing studies in 1989 found overall rates of discrimination in access to housing for African Americans that were only trivially different from those observed a decade earlier (for the most up-to-date review of the literature, see Charles 2003).

Second, the theory of black self-segregation treats black choice and action as if it exists in a vacuum. That is, it ignores altogether what are almost surely important feedback mechanisms that prompt many blacks to self-select into black neighborhoods out of the reasonable expectation that they would encounter hostility from some white neighbors. As formulated by the Thernstroms and others, the self-segregation hypothesis fails to address the immediately relevant question of whether African Americans would self-select into predominantly black communities in the absence of historic experience, current collective memory, and ongoing encounters with contemporary racism. The best available empirical evidence suggests that blacks as a group are the people who are the most likely to prefer integration and to comfortably accept living in minority group status in a neighborhood (Charles 2000).

Part of the message here concerning theoretical interpretation on the right and the left is that variables and data never speak for themselves. It is the questions we pose (and those we fail to ask) as well as our theories, concepts, and ideas that bring a narrative and meaning to marginal distributions, correlations, regression coefficients, and statistics of all kinds. If we suffer from failures of sociological imagination, if we conceive of race and racism in ways that disassociate them from white privilege, black agency, and the interrelations between the two phenomena, then we are bound to get things wrong however

much we may have followed formal statistical criteria and other normative canons of science. Or, as the sociologist Tufu Zuberi (2001, 144) puts it in his new book, *Thicker Than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie*: "Most racial statistics lack a critical evaluation of racist structures that encourage pathological interpretations. These pathological interpretations have had a profound impact on our causal theories and statistical methods. Our theories of society, not our empirical evidence, guide how we interpret racial data."

Indeed, it is that perspective on racist structures, or what the political scientists Michael Dawson (2001) and Claire Jean Kim (2000) call the American racial order, that informs a very different reading of the import of white privilege and black agency.

CAVEATS

A series of interpretative caveats should be borne in mind here. First, although I have spoken extensively about black-white relations, I am mindful of the extent to which this is an increasingly partial view of American race relations. The rapid and continuing expansion of the Asian and Latino populations in the United States and the unique experiences and issues faced by members of these internally diverse communities will inevitably reshape the American social landscape. However, it is not at all clear that the continued diversification of the United States in any way fundamentally destabilizes the historic black-white divide. The urban sociologist Herbert Gans (1999) has written a provocative and I think more than suggestive essay arguing that we are evolving as a nation toward a new major racial dichotomy: the black versus the nonblack. Accordingly, we would still have racial hierarchy and some degree of heterogeneity, especially within the nonblack category (which include whites and those effectively earning the title of honorary whites, such as successful middle-class Asians). And much of the arsenal of analytical tools and perspectives that long helped to make sense of the black-white divide would have applicability in such a new context. Similarly, my colleague Mary Waters's (1999) powerful recent book, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, makes clear just how salient the black-white divide remains even for an immigrant population that arrived committed to transcending race.

Second, wartime and the social upheaval occasioned by war can present a powerful opportunity for reshaping the landscape of race relations. Indeed, the political scientists Philip Klinkner and Rogers Smith (1999) craft a persuasive claim that war is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for improvements in the status of blacks. They argue that far-reaching qualitative changes in the status of African Americans have typically involved the convergence of three factors: a major wartime mobilization that ultimately required a large number of black troops; an enemy viewed as profoundly antidemocratic, thereby heightening the claims for fuller realization of democratic ideals at home;

and significant internal political mobilization and contestation from below demanding reform.

Viewed in this light, the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent military actions in Afghanistan against the al Qaeda network and the ruling Taliban regime and the later war in Iraq raise again the possibility of this convergence of circumstances. That the early televised images of the devastation at the World Trade Center in New York were so thoroughly multiracial and multiethnic only heightens this potential. And that African Americans in the persons of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice occupy such high leadership posts adds to the salutary import of the moment. Certainly we are already witnessing journalistic accounts of a nation pulling together and uniting in ways that may heal otherwise deep racial divisions.¹¹

Yet at this moment there are no strong indications that these events will seriously shift the landscape of black-white relations. Not all wartime moments do, as Klinkner and Smith note with regard to the Spanish-American War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Third, I have scarcely touched upon the matter of class divisions within the African American community and the growth of the black middle class. Nor, for that matter, have I wrestled with the ways in which gender and sexuality also condition life along the color line. It must be stressed that class, gender, and sexuality all become dividing lines within the African American community (and outside it) in ways that shape agendas, the capacity for mobilization, and even ideas about who is a full member of the community (Cohen 1999; Dawson 1994, 2001). My objective has been to focus on those aspects of contemporary race relations that largely cut across these cleavages and thus are centrally experienced as "race," rather than examine the intersection of race with other statuses and identities. I do not mean to dismiss or disregard these other factors, but rather to stress that there remain social conditions we must understand and engage as a distinctive racial divide.

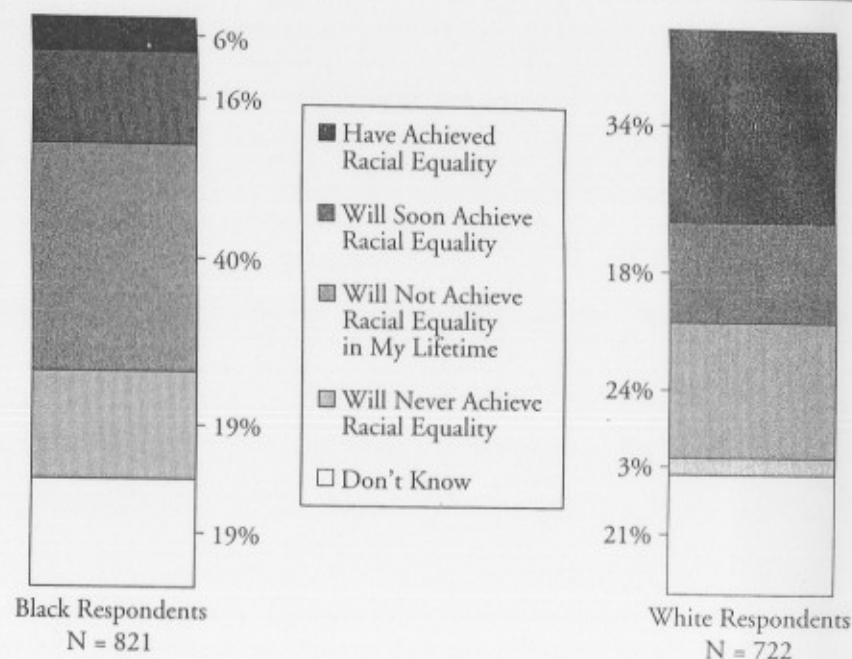
CONCLUSION

I opened with the words of a young, angry white male who saw "trashy" Section 8 blacks coming into his neighborhood with government subsidies and diminishing what he perceived as a standard of life that he had earned and that set him above and apart from them. And with the words of a middle-aged, churchgoing black woman who returned to her home one Sunday morning not only to do battle with a burglar but later with the racially biased police and criminal justice system. As these two cases attest, race remains a deep divide in America.

Of course, black and white Americans could scarcely be further apart in their own judgments about the severity of the racial divide. As part of an election study in 2000, Michael Dawson and I asked a large national sample of

blacks and whites about the likelihood of achieving racial equality in America.¹² Figure 2.5 shows the results. A full one-third of whites said that we had already achieved it, in contrast to a mere 6 percent of African Americans. One in five blacks said that we never would achieve it, and another two out of five said that it would never happen in their lifetimes. Blacks see a deep and lingering social ill, and whites see a problem that is just about resolved. Without claiming to "know" the answer, I interpret responses of "have already achieved racial equality" and perhaps even of "will soon achieve racial equality" to constitute a deliberate evasion of responsibility more than a thoughtful assessment or response to social realities (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Kluegel and Bobo 2001). Too many friction points, inequalities, and signs of discrimination remain to take such views at face value.

FIGURE 2.5 RESPONDENTS' RACE AND BELIEFS ABOUT RACIAL EQUALITY



Do you think that blacks have achieved racial equality, will soon achieve racial equality, will not achieve racial equality in your lifetime, or will never achieve racial equality?

Source: National African American Election Study (2000).

Indeed, it is fair to still speak of white supremacy in America and of racism in America (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Feagin 2001). The persistence of white supremacy and the enduring potency of racism, I believe, trace to the adaptive capacity of racial ideologies. As Thomas Holt (2000, 27–28) has explained: “Race is ideological, but, being embedded in political economies that are quite historically specific, it cannot long survive changes in the material base from which it draws sustenance.” The defeat of Jim Crow racism and the victories of the civil rights era did not eradicate black-white economic inequality, labor market discrimination, or gargantuan disparities in accumulated wealth; they did not end residential segregation by race and randomly disperse people in physical space; they did not reallocate political power; and they did not completely repudiate the racist stereotypes and other elements of American political culture and whites’ sense of entitlement that feed and sustain racism.

These victories did, however, fundamentally restructure the terrain on which racism is now enacted, understood, and reproduced. This new regime of *laissez-faire* racism is more fluid and permeable than the Jim Crow regime. It works in ways that permit, on the one hand, the carefully delimited and controlled success of a Colin Powell, a Condoleezza Rice, or even an Oprah Winfrey, but that, on the other hand, do not eliminate the ghetto, black joblessness, and poverty and do not even wince at a despicable effort at black voter disenfranchisement. Indeed, it works in ways that allow a young working-class white man to seethe with anger at a social policy effort to extend a step up for poor blacks and in ways that allow a churchgoing black woman to endure the tragic burden of fighting a black burglar and the white police. These are all manifestations of our continued entrapment in the snare of racism.

I have no battle plan for defeating *laissez-faire* racism. What we can do as scholars is, first, to struggle to conceptualize, name, and understand as accurately as possible what is happening and to make those ideas widely available. Let’s tell the story of enduring inequality in its fullness and according to the highest standards that we can attain.

Second, we can push for changes and social policies that speak to what our analyses tell us are the central structural and cultural problems. In that regard, the push for a serious dialogue about race—for truth and reconciliation, for an apology, and most of all for reparations—is a major element of the next stage of the struggle (Dawson and Popoff 2004). Liberal and progressive voices must turn away from the demand that the black political agenda be entirely suppressed in favor of a race-neutral, purely universalistic or centrist political agenda (see Thompson 1998).

And third, I do not believe it is possible to accomplish a recognition of one’s full humanity without demanding it as such. Careful political thinking and organizing is necessary, to be sure. Strategic coalitions reaching across lines of class, color, and ethnicity will be essential. Working through conventional legal and political channels will be necessary too. But I remain doubtful that

hidden agendas and half-measures will do what it takes to finally crush the legacy of white supremacy in America, to dislodge *laissez-faire* racism, and to lead us to that mountaintop that Martin Luther King spoke of the night before he was assassinated.

NOTES

1. The white focus group, led by a white, professional focus group moderator, had nine participants, six men and three women. Everyone in the group had at least a high school education, with an average of 15.1 years of schooling. The average age was 48.3, and participants had an average income of \$66,700. The group lasted for two hours and after some opening general topics moved to issues of crime and criminal justice.
2. The black focus group, led by a black, professional focus group moderator, had nine participants, five men and four women. Everyone in the group had at least a high school education, with an average of 14.2 years of schooling. The average age of participants was 40.6, and participants had an average income of \$51,900. The group lasted for two hours and after some opening general topics moved to issues of crime and criminal justice.
3. Two recent series of events underscore just how arbitrarily and unjustly the criminal justice system can act in black communities, especially low-income ones. Based on an erroneous tip from a police informant, New York City police officers used a concussion grenade to enter, without knocking or providing any warning, the home of a fifty-seven-year-old Harlem woman. She was a career civil servant with no criminal history or involvement in drug-dealing, and she was dressing to go to work at the time of the 6:00 A.M. raid. Officers broke down her door and tossed in the grenade, and she was initially handcuffed by police officers. Within two hours she had died of a heart attack (Rashbaum 2003). Of somewhat broader notoriety are the Tulia, Texas, drug arrests carried out by a white undercover agent who provided the only evidence and testimony against a number of defendants, the overwhelming majority of whom were African American. In August 2003, the governor of Texas pardoned thirty-five people (thirty-one of whom were black), many of whom had already served lengthy years in jail, when that evidence turned out to be fabricated (Liptak 2003).
4. As I develop later, race is neither a biological nor a primordial cultural imperative or affiliation, but a historically contingent social construction. It also varies in configuration and salience over time (Collins 2001). The experience of race may be importantly conditioned by and intersect

- with class, gender, and sexuality, among other variables (Cohen 1999). It nonetheless has powerful social effects (for other definitional issues, see Bobo [2001] and Bobo and Tuan [forthcoming]), but these effects are best understood as part of a social process (Zuberi 2001) that is greatly influenced by significant social actors, as expressed in such forms as government policy (Nobles 2000), rather than as static demographic categories.
5. This critique of the left and the right with regard to race is very similar to the historian Alice O'Connor's (2001) definitive analysis of the shortcomings of social science examinations of poverty in the post-World War II era. She finds that larger economic structures and racial dynamics were often obscured by a narrow focus on the specific circumstances or behaviors of those who were poor. The consequence, she suggests, has been a set of analyses and policy prescriptions too heavily tilted toward altering individual behavior and insufficiently focused on the larger and more fundamental social and political forces that constrain opportunity.
 6. The laissez-faire racism argument rests on an analysis of the critical historical changes in the configuration of demographic, economic, political, and cultural forces that, on the one hand, opened the door to a sustained and effective attack on Jim Crow institutional arrangements and ideas. These factors include the waning economic and political power of the old southern planter elite, the urban and northern migration of African Americans and attendant growth in human capital and social capital in black hands, and the growing intellectual and cultural assault on notions of "biological racism." On the other hand, the laissez-faire racism theory also points to the persistence of residential segregation, enormous economic inequality (especially in terms of accumulated assets or wealth), limited political representation, and deep reservoirs of antiblack attitudes and beliefs that have powerfully constrained and channeled progressive racial reform. This historical argument provides the basis for contemporary empirical analyses showing how whites' attitudes shifted toward more qualified stereotyping of blacks, away from biological attributions for black-white differences to cultural attributions, and toward resistance to strong integrationist and equal opportunity policies.
 7. The data come from my 2001 Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Study. These data were collected by Knowledge Networks using a nationally representative, Web-based social survey design, with 978 white and 1,010 black respondents. The within-panel response rate for blacks was 72 percent and it was 61 percent for whites. Fuller information on the sample and respondent characteristics are reported in Bobo and Johnson (2004).
 8. That stereotypes are likely to influence blacks as well as whites is strongly suggested by the pioneering work of the social psychologist Claude Steele (1998) on the notion of stereotype threat. Insightful work by Kimberly Torres and Camille Charles (2004), based on in-depth interviews with black students on an elite college campus, shows how these students are aware of whites' negative stereotypes about blacks and strive to differentiate themselves from stigmatizing group images, which they too take seriously.
 9. The data come from the 1997-1998 National Omnibus Survey conducted by the University of Maryland Survey Research Center. It involved a random digit dial telephone survey of 838 white, 115 black, and 51 other race respondents. The survey had an overall cooperation rate of 68 percent and a conservatively estimated response rate of 55 percent.
 10. Several scholars, most notably David O. Sears (1988), Donald R. Kinder (Kinder and Sanders 1996), and John B. McConahay (1986), have advocated for the theory. Over time some differences in usage, labeling, and measurement have emerged among these (and other) scholars. For example, both McConahay and Kinder have moved away from the label "symbolic racism," the former preferring "modern racism" and the latter "racial resentment." Sears retains the original concept label.
 11. Immediately following the events of September 11, the *New York Times* reported on newfound interracial harmony, particularly between police and the African American community (Sengupta 2001).
 12. The 2000 National African American Election Study was a nationally representative, Web-based survey conducted by Knowledge Networks. It included a preelection panel of 831 African Americans and post-election panel of 605 African Americans and a fresh sample of 724 whites. Fuller details on the sample characteristics and respondents may be found in Dawson and Popoff (2004) and Bobo and Johnson (2004).

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