

# ***Racist America, Third Edition***

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## **Preface**

A few years back the prominent white comedian Michael Richards, who was once part of the television show *Seinfeld*, was caught on camera yelling racist slurs, including “nigger,” at black customers in his audience during a comedic performance. According to news reports, Richards yelled at one black audience member: “Shut up! Fifty years ago, we’d have you upside down . . .” as part of his commentary. Later he apologized, with an explanation that “I work in a very uncontrolled manner onstage. I do a lot of free association.”<sup>1</sup>

Some months later popular radio talk show host Don Imus made similarly blatant racist comments about a successful black women’s basketball team. He laughingly called these talented college students “nappy-headed hos.” Imus brought harsh emotion-laden framing of black women usually reserved for white locker-room banter into the public frontstage. Imus was briefly fired, but white executives soon had him back on the radio. Surveys indicated that the overwhelming majority of African Americans thought he should have been fired for his remarks, but only 47 percent of whites agreed. Apparently, a large proportion of white Americans do not see such viciously racist public attacks as particularly serious.<sup>2</sup> Blatantly racist incidents still routinely erupt across a country that many people now wishfully describe as “post-racial.”

Anthropologist Jane Hill has examined how and why many whites come to define racist outbursts by white celebrities and politicians as not serious, as “gaffes” that do not reveal a deeper racist framing of the protagonists. Her research makes clear the central role of the English language in embedding and perpetuating the old and very deep white racial framing of U.S. society. The widespread character of this “gaffe” racism, and the way such events get discussed

obsessively and circulated extensively around the society, are an indication that the old-fashioned racism of the past has not disappeared and been replaced by a post-racial society.<sup>3</sup>

In verbal attacks on black Americans, these prominent white entertainers used emotion-laden racist words, imagery, and commentary that was taken out of a centuries-old white-racist framing of black Americans. Such views date back to the days of slavery and legal segregation. These views and actions stemming from them today reveal the important aspects of the societal racism examined in this book—the negative images of black men and women dancing in white heads, the white racial framing that legitimates antiblack images, the commonplace discriminatory practices of whites, the arrogance of white power, and white-dominated institutions that allow or encourage such racist practices.

In the United States, racist thought, emotion, and action are structured into the rhythms of everyday life. They are lived, concrete, advantageous for whites, and painful for those who are not white. Each major part of the life of a white person or a person of color is shaped directly or indirectly by this country's systemic racism. Even a person's birth and parents are often shaped by racism, since mate selection is limited by racist pressures against intimate interracial relationships and intermarriage. Where one lives is frequently determined by the racist practices of landlords, bankers, and others in the real-estate profession. The clothes one wears and what one has to eat are affected by access to resources that varies by position in the U.S. racial hierarchy. When one goes off to school, her or his education is shaped by contemporary racism—from the composition of the student body to the character of the curriculum. Where one goes to church is often shaped by racism, and it is likely that racism affects who one's political representatives are. Even getting sick, dying, and being buried may be influenced by systemic

racism. Every part of the life cycle, and most aspects of one's life, are shaped by the racism that is integral to the foundation and continuing operation of the United States.

One of the great tragedies today is the inability or unwillingness of most white Americans to see clearly and understand fully this racist reality. Among whites, including white elites, there is a commonplace denial of personal, family, and group histories of racism. Most do not see themselves or their families as seriously implicated in racial oppression, in the distant past or the present. Referring to themselves, most will say fervently, "I am not a racist." Referring to ancestors, many will say something like, "My family never owned slaves" or "My family never benefited from segregation." Assuming racial discrimination to be a thing of the past, many assert that African Americans are "paranoid" about racism and often give them firm advice: forget the past and move on, because "slavery happened hundreds of years ago." Most do not wish to honestly discuss issues of contemporary racial framing and discrimination.

Over the last few decades, numerous white commentators have suggested that white racism is no longer a serious problem. Thus, one analysis of white attitudes on public policy matters concludes that "racism is not built-in to the American ethos," while another book boldly proclaims "the end of racism."<sup>4</sup> This line of argument about a post-racial society has become more popular since Senator Barack Obama's pathbreaking election as president in 2008. The "post-racial" perspective now articulated by mainstream commentators often includes the idea that contemporary black politicians like President Obama have an obligation to be racial healers who do not articulate a civil-rights enforcement agenda and whose elections prove racism is no longer a serious barrier to societal achievement for Americans of color. Thus, the business newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*, asserted Obama's election is a "tribute to American opportunity, and it is something that has never happened in another Western democracy—

notwithstanding European condescension about ‘racist’ America.” The editorial continued with the assertion that “perhaps we can put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country.”<sup>5</sup>

Such unwillingness to face current racist realities is not healthy for the present or future of the United States. It has been said that a major task for the residents of the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe is to forget the falsified past once taught them and to learn the hard facts about that oppressive past. In this process, old heroes become villains, and old villains become heroes. One can say the same about white (and some other) Americans and U.S. history. Few mainstream media presentations or school textbooks provide full and accurate accounts of the history or current status of racial oppression in the United States.

The great scholar of the African diaspora, C.L.R. James, argued that the oppressive situation of African Americans is the number-one problem of racism in the contemporary world. If the problem of white racism cannot be solved in the U.S., it cannot be solved anywhere.<sup>6</sup> In this book I focus primarily on this critical case of white-on-black oppression in the United States. One reason is practical: given limited space, this focus means I can dig deeper into the development, structure, processes, and likely future of one major case of white-imposed racism. My decision is also theoretically motivated. I will show that white-on-black oppression is in important respects the archetype of racial oppression in North America. For example, African Americans were the only racial group specifically singled out several times in the U.S. Constitution for subordination within the new U.S. nation. James Madison, the leading theorist of the Constitution, openly noted that, from a white point of view, “the case of the black race within our bosom . . . is the problem most baffling to the policy of our country.”<sup>7</sup>

A few decades later, white-on-black oppression would be central to the bloodiest war in U.S. history, the Civil War. Within this white-dominated society, African Americans have been subordinated and exploited by whites in much larger numbers than any other racial group. Over nearly four centuries, tens of millions of African Americans have had their labor and wealth regularly taken from them. In contrast to other groups, their original languages, cultures, and family ties were substantially obliterated by their being torn from Africa, and the oppression faced under slavery and segregation was extremely dehumanized, racialized, and systematic. No other racially oppressed group, and there have been numerous others, has been so central to the internal economic, political, and cultural structure and evolution of the North American society—or to the often obsessively racist frame developed by white Americans over many generations. Thus, it is time to put white-on-black oppression fully at the center of a comprehensive study of the development, meaning, and reality of this country.

In this book I assist in the development of an antiracist theory and analysis of the white-on-black oppression that is almost four centuries old. Theory is a set of ideas designed to make sense of the empirical and existential reality around us. Concepts delineating and probing racism need to be clear and honed by everyday experience. Here I accent concepts, in language understandable to the non-specialist, that can be used for an in-depth analysis of this still-racist society. These concepts are designed to help readers probe beneath the many defenses and myths about “race” to our deep and painful racist realities. They are useful in countering inaccurate assessments of the society’s racialized history and institutions. A critical theory of racism can help us better understand the numerous racialized dimensions of our everyday lives.

We need an antiracist theory not only to explain the operation of the racist system but also to envision possibilities for change. Antiracist theory attempts to facilitate agency, the movement of

human actors to bring change in spite of oppression. Antioppression analysts have long viewed the relationship between structures of oppression and human agency as dialectical. Structures of domination shape everyday existence, but an insightful understanding of these structures and their recurring contradictions can assist people in forcefully resisting racial oppression. It is hard to be optimistic in times of continuing oppression, but some contradictions—especially everyday resistance by those oppressed—can provide a source of optimism because they suggest significant possibilities for human societal change.

Systemic racism is about everyday experience. People are born, live, and die within the racist system. Much recent social-science research helps to unmask the workings of the deep structures of this persisting system. My conceptual perspective is informed not only by the research of others but also by numerous field-research projects that I and my colleagues have undertaken in recent years. These projects have entailed more than 500 in-depth interviews with African Americans and other Americans of color in various walks of life about daily encounters with racial hostility and discrimination. Staying in contact with the lived experience of seasoned veterans of racism enables an analyst to move beyond the mental construction of race to the concrete reality, daily trials, and accumulating burdens of everyday racism. Black Americans and other people of color often experience the societal world differently from white Americans, and this experience can be an important guide for conceptualizing the structures, processes, and future of U.S. racism. My colleagues and I have also spent much time interviewing more than 300 white Americans on their racial views and issues of public policy. I also draw on these interviews in understanding white perspectives and actions on racial matters.

Currently, we have theoretical traditions that are relatively well developed in regard to the systems of class- and gender-oppression in the U.S. and other Western countries. There is a well-

developed Marxist tradition with its many important conceptual contributions. The Marxist tradition provides a powerful theory of social oppression centered on such key concepts as class struggle, worker exploitation, and alienation. Marxism identifies the basic social forces undergirding class oppression, shows how human beings are alienated from each other in class relations, and points toward activist remedies for oppression. Similarly, in feminist analysis there is a diverse and well-developed conceptual framework targeting key aspects of gendered oppression. Major approaches accent the social construction of sexuality, the world gender order, and the strategy of consciousness-raising. Feminist theorists and activists have argued that at the heart of institutional sexism is the material reality of human reproduction and sexuality, the latter including how a woman is treated and viewed sexually by men and how she views herself. Systemic sexism is a concept that is now being developed. In the Marxist and feminist traditions, there are also well-developed theories of group resistance and change.

In the case of racist oppression, however, we do not as yet have as strongly agreed-upon concepts and well-developed theoretical traditions as we have for class and gender oppression. Of course, numerous researchers, writers, and activists have focused their analytical and theoretical tools on the deep structure of North American racism now for more than a century. In this book I draw heavily on these important analysts, past and present—including Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W.E.B. Du Bois, Oliver Cox, Kwame Ture, and Bob Blauner, among numerous others. Each of these analysts has probed various aspects of this country's racist history and institutions, and some have defined basic concepts for the analysis of institutionalized racism. Beginning more than a century ago, these scholars and activists began a paradigm shift in conceptualizing and analyzing institutional and systemic racism, as well as antiracism. As yet, however, there is no widely used term for this

antioppression paradigm, and I propose that we choose terms like “systemic racism,” “antiracist theory,” and “antiracist strategies” for this growing antioppression tradition.

Today, the dominant social-science paradigm, seen in much mainstream scholarship on “race,” still views racism as something in decline or as something tacked on to an otherwise healthy American society. One variant of this perspective portrays the problem as one of white bigots betraying egalitarian ideals and institutions – the theme developed well by then famous Gunnar Myrdal in the 1940s and by his contemporary followers (see Chapter 9, pp. xxxx). Another variant in the mainstream approach accents “intergroup relations” or “race relations,” the array of intergroup relations and conflicts in society, with whites seen as only one group among many others having more or less equal impact or resources on an increasingly level playing field. As I will show, however, the central problem is that, from the beginning, European American institutions were racially hierarchical, white-racist, and undemocratic. To a very substantial degree, they remain so today.

Nicolaus Copernicus started a revolution in astronomy by putting the sun at the center of the solar system. Begun some time ago by African American activists such as David Walker and scholar-activists such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a revolution in the analysis of U.S. racism is gradually developing, one that views the U.S. social system as imbedding white racism at its very core. The conceptual framework developed in this book places the reality, development, and crises of systemic racism at the heart of U.S. history and society. Here I develop a theoretical approach centered on the concept of systemic racism, viewed as a centuries-old foundation of North American society. A systemic racism approach sees white-on-black oppression as the substantial foundation of this society, one in place since the seventeenth century and persisting to the present day. White-on-black oppression, and other

white-on-nonwhite oppression, has been the central racial reality of this country for four centuries.

Systemic racism involves both the deep structures and the surface structures of racial oppression. It includes the complex array of antiblack practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and the emotion-laden racist framing created by whites to maintain and rationalize their privilege and power. Systemic racism thus encompasses the white-racist attitudes, ideologies, emotions, images, actions, and institutions of this society. This racism is a material, social, and ideological reality and is indeed systemic, which means that the racist reality is manifested in all major institutions. If you break a three-dimensional hologram into separate parts and shine a laser through any one part, you can project the whole three-dimensional image again from within that part. Like a hologram, each major part of U.S. society—the economy, politics, education, religion, the family—reflects the fundamental realities of systemic racism.

Many Americans, especially white Americans, view racism as just an individual matter, as something only outspoken bigots engage in. Yet racism is much more than an individual matter. It is both individual and systemic. Systemic racism is perpetuated by a broad social-reproduction process that generates not only the recurring patterns of racial discrimination within institutions and by individuals but also a deeply alienating racist relationship—on the one hand, the racially oppressed, and on the other, the racial oppressors. These two groups are created by the racist system, and thus have different experiences and group interests. The former resists and seeks to overthrow the system, while the latter seeks to maintain it. Thus, in dialectical fashion oppression creates contradictions that can bring change. Everyday oppression and the great

inequality of socioeconomic resources across the color line regularly lead to subtle and overt resistance by Americans of color.

While racism directed at Americans of color is a core characteristic of U.S. society, it is not the only major type of institutionalized oppression. I do not claim here that an antiracist theory can explain everything about societal oppression. Indeed, I reject a reductionist analysis that tries to reduce all oppressions to one type. A pluralistic analysis of oppression is necessary. Indeed, class-structured capitalism, sexism, bureaucratic authoritarianism, and heterosexism are all important parts of the webbed package of oppressions internal to U.S. society. As I proceed, I will note some aspects of other oppressions as they intersect and interact with racial oppression at various points in this book.

As we move well into the twenty-first century, people of color are now more than 80 percent of the world's population and are gradually becoming a demographic majority in the U.S. Today, Americans of color constitute more than half the population of four of the country's largest cities—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. They will soon make up more than half the population in large areas of the country, including the largest states. Americans of color are now a majority in California, Texas, Hawaii, New Mexico, and the District of Columbia. By the 2020s the states of Arizona, Nevada, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, New York, and New Jersey are also predicted to have populations in which whites are a minority. Sometime in the 2040s, whites will likely become a statistical minority in the U.S. population as a whole.<sup>8</sup> These impressive demographic changes will probably bring great pressures for change in the ordinary racist practices and institutions of this country. Moreover, as the world's peoples of color become more influential in international politics and economics, yet other pressures are likely to

be put on U.S. political-economic institutions to treat all people of color with greater fairness and justice.

We also need an international perspective on the systemic racism central to the United States. Adopting an international human-rights perspective provides a place from which to critically assess human rights, social justice, and racial equality in a powerful nation-state like the United States. There is a growing international view of what are fundamental human rights, which include rights extending well beyond the civil rights ideally guaranteed by U.S. laws. Drawing on this international viewpoint, one can argue that people are entitled to equal treatment because they are human beings, not because they are members of a particular nation-state. According to the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the U.S. government signed, fundamental human rights are rooted in the inherent dignity of each human being, are inalienable and universal, and are acquired by birth by "all members of the human family." This Declaration asserts the principle of non-discrimination and equality and lists three fundamental human rights: life, liberty, and personal security. The right to a life free from racial discrimination and oppression is clearly enunciated in international law and morality. Today, the United States stands judged by international human rights doctrine and law as still quite unjust and inegalitarian in its racial structures and contours.<sup>9</sup>

#### [H1] Overview of Chapter Revisions

Responding to students, teachers, and other readers, I have added throughout this edition many enhancements, revisions, and updates. In all chapters I have updated important statistics and included significant new data and analysis from more than 200 recent research reports and studies relevant to aspects of systemic racism. Although I continue with a central focus on white-

on-black oppression, I have added significant research material on how systemic racism affects Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.

Throughout the chapters I have clarified and expanded important points about how systemic racism operates. For instance, I have significantly enhanced the discussion of how systemic racism is reproduced over the generations. In Chapters 1, 2, and 7, I have drawn on new research showing (1) how most white families have had far greater access to asset and wealth development over many generations than most African American families and many other families of color, and thus (2) how a majority of white families have been able to pass important assets and wealth from one generation to the next. This research-based discussion is central to explaining how racism is indeed systemic and persists even as its powerful reproductive mechanisms rarely make their way into public discussions.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I have added significant materials on the white racial frame's dimensions and operation in many areas, including new research on the racist realities and impacts of popular culture such as video gaming and internet websites. Chapter 4 also presents new material on the white-framed attacks on President Barack Obama. The increase in research on the operation and institutionalization of racial oppression has been significant, and I have split old Chapter 5 into two chapters (5 and 6) on the persisting patterns of discrimination in major U.S. institutions. Among other enhancements, Chapter 5 has updated discussions of discrimination against voters of color, racial profiling in police and other agencies, and the persisting school segregation now supported by the Supreme Court. Chapter 6 has new or updated discussions of housing discrimination, racism in college and professional sports, discrimination against administrators of color in higher education, and the role of pro-white favoritism in numerous employment spheres.

In Chapter 7, I have added new data and discussion on the reality and consequences of income and wealth inequality along racial lines. In Chapter 8, I have updated the discussion of the impacts of systemic racism on nonblack Americans of color, including a new section on the white-racist framing of Native Americans and their interests in sports mascots controversies.

In Chapter 9, I have enhanced the discussion of anti-racist strategies by black Americans and other Americans of color in face of white backtracking in regard to racial justice. I have added discussions of important new research on numerous diversity and anti-racism efforts, including concrete examples of successful educational and other anti-racist efforts by individuals and organizations committed to significant change. Expanded too is the discussion of the increasing demographic diversity of the U.S. and the reality and societal impact of whites no longer being a majority of the population in various states, and eventually in the country as a whole.