Discrimination, Class Conflict or Cultural Degeneracy: An Analytical Review of Theoretical Arguments Purporting Causes of Racial Disparities in America

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Issues of inequality and racial disparities are some of the most contentious issues in American politics and the issues have been raised again in the 2016 presidential primary campaigns. The difference between African Americans and whites in terms of social outcomes has been a constant feature exhibited across American history. There have been important changes in racial relations in the United States since the 1960s including many new political and economic opportunities for African Americans. The most egregious discriminatory practices have by now been prohibited by law. Yet, sharp disparities remain, and differential treatments along with disparities outcomes for racial groups seem resistant to legal remedies and changes in public policy. This article provides a critical review of the some of the most commonly cited primary causes for disparate racial outcomes. Conceptual contentions regarding the study of racial discrimination and disparities are described and explicated. By critiquing works of several prominent authors the explanatory power of their theoretical positions is evaluated.

The Prevalence of Disparity

African Americans live in the same geographical area with whites, they are governed by the same laws and regulations, they generally purchase the same goods and services, and they interact within the same major institutions of American society. African Americans frequently have close social contact with white Americans. They often have the same or similar religious values, they commonly enjoy the same kinds of food, music, sports and entertainment activities, they have similar career aspirations, and they speak the same language.

Despite this long list of broad similarities and shared experiences among African Americans and whites, we nevertheless observe stark differences between them in practically every major category of social well-being. Racial disparities run rampant throughout the American political economy. Incidents of blatant racial discrimination are occasionally exposed such as the Justice Department’s recent report on the biased law enforcement practices of the
local officials in Ferguson, Missouri or the targeting of African Americans for subprime loans by major banks during the period leading up to the 2008 financial crisis. However, racial discriminatory patterns are usually only implicit, operating through subtle socialization practices and impersonal institutional procedures and therefore inconspicuous. Civil rights legislation brought an end to legalized anti-black discrimination, but wide disparities in outcomes between blacks and whites have not substantially changed in 50 years\(^1\).

Blacks are more likely to be uninsured, and they are less likely to be treated with certain procedures. Yet, blacks report chronic illnesses and disabilities more frequently than other demographic groups. Black women have lower rates of breast cancer than white women, but of those with the disease black women suffer a higher mortality. Mortality rates for heart disease and other forms of cancer also tend to be significantly higher for blacks. Overall, whites can expect to live about 78 years, while the life expectancy of blacks is 73 years.\(^2\)

The most valuable asset owned by most families is the family home, and about 46 percent of blacks own their own home in comparison 74 percent of white families. According to the Pew Research Center surveys, the median wealth of white households increased between the years of 2010 – 2013 by 2.4 percent from $138,000 to $141,900. During this same time frame the median wealth of Black households decreased by 33.7 percent from $16,600 to $11,000.\(^3\) Furthermore, blacks are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, but even when employed with the same kind of job blacks can expect to earn less income. The Georgetown Center on Education and the

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\(^3\) “Kings Dream Remains and Illusive Goal; Many Americans See Racial Disparities,” pewresearch.org, August 22, 2013.
Workforce found that Blacks earn on average $2,000 - $10,000 less than whites for the ten highest paying professions. Overall, blacks earned 66 percent of the income earned by whites in 2011 according to Pew Research Center surveys. At the same time the poverty rate was 27.6 percent for blacks, but 9.8 percent for whites. Median household income for whites in 2011 was $67,175 compared to $39,760 for Blacks.

Perhaps the most glaring racial disparities are to be found in the criminal justice system. African Americans are 13 percent of the population, but they account for 28 percent of all arrests and 40 percent of all prison inmates. Blacks are more likely to be sentenced to prison, and less likely to receive probation than whites who are charged and convicted of the same offense. The average sentence for a violent crime given a Black inmate was one year longer than that given to a white inmate. African American juveniles are placed in residential facilities at four times the rate of white juveniles.

Over the past decade several studies have indicated that whites engage in recreational drug use more frequently, but Blacks are more likely to be arrested and convicted on drug charges. An ACLU study covering ten years from 2001 to 2010 found that 18 to 25 year whites use marijuana as slightly higher rates than blacks, but blacks were much more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession. White adolescents and young adults are significantly more

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5 “Kings Dream Remains and Illusive Goal; Many Americans See Racial Disparities,” pewresearch.org, August 22, 2013.


likely to misuse prescriptions drugs than blacks.\textsuperscript{8} Some studies further reveal that whites deal drugs more often, while blacks are more likely to be arrested for drug dealing.\textsuperscript{9} Overall, blacks are arrested and imprisoned at significantly higher rates on drug charges. The 2012 Bureau of Justice Prisoners Report indicated that Blacks made 45 percent of those imprisoned for drug offenses while whites were 30 percent of that number.

All things being equal, there should be little or no variation with respect to race for outcomes in income, wealth, life expectancy or crime. That is we would expect that over time the average collective outcomes for blacks and whites living under the same conditions in America will be more or less the same. But, blacks and whites in America while sharing the same social environment experience vastly different outcomes. An explanation is demanded to account for how these circumstances have come about.

We will critique the perspectives of several authors who have offered their own hypotheses, analyses, and conclusions in the attempt to explain the entrenched and pervasive racial disparities in America. Without question, the initial relationship between whites and blacks existed on a predicated stance where whites assumed the dominant position. Blacks were subordinated and their labor forcibly expropriated and systematically prevented from gaining access to resources and opportunities for social advancement. Researchers and scholars disagree on why this is so, and we will investigate the merits and demerits of several arguments.

\textsuperscript{8} Broman et al., J Child Adolesc Behav 2015, 3:5 http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2375-4494.1000239
\textsuperscript{9} Christopher Ingraham, “Whites are more likely to deal drugs, but black people are more likely to get arrested for it,” washingtonpost.com, September 30, 2014, accessed on February 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/09/30/white-people-are-more-likely-to-deal-drugs-but-black-people-are-more-likely-to-get-arrested-for-it/
Conceptualizing Difficulties

It is not unusual for intellectual disagreements to center on different perspectives of what seems to be the very same phenomenon. Two different authors may use the same terms such as race or class in reference to social relationships, and yet the meanings implied by each author may be quite different or even contradictory. Although they seem to be addressing the same phenomenon, they are in fact discussing different phenomena or perhaps different aspects of the same general phenomenon.

To avoid such confusion, we may endeavor to define the terms of the debate, and to clarify our conceptual understandings when pursuing an inquiry of the phenomena in question. Well-defined analytically precise terms are used to give detailed descriptions for research investigations and to make comparative evaluations or qualitative analyses. However, such descriptions may narrow the focus of attention to such an extent that major aspects of the phenomenon are excluded from consideration. Some authors deal with that problem by giving broad general descriptions of the concepts under consideration that seemingly fit most situations as opposed to conceptualizing more precise designations. However, the capacity to make definitive unambiguous determinations might be lost. An author may avoid the problem of definitions altogether by sidestepping any definitive designations, and simply proceeding to use the terms in question as though their definitions were already commonly known.

Thomas Sowell notes that the term race has been used with various meanings. He further determines to avoid “semantic issues” and decides to refer to both “racial and ethnic groups under the rubric of race, in part because more precise definitions could easily lose touch with social realities in a world of growing racial intermixtures over the generations.” He finds that, “…biological intermixtures have accelerated in our own times, even as the stridency of racial
identity rhetoric has increased."^{10} Of course, if one cannot provide clear descriptions of race and ethnicity or even distinguish between the two, then we might consider it premature to speak of increases or decreases in biracialism or racial intermixtures. Sowell simply ignores the historical origins and the chronological development of scientific racism. He pretends not to notice that racial constructs in the modern world have a definite history, and that these ideologies have repeatedly and overwhelmingly been used to the advantage of particular groups and against the interests of others. Nevertheless, using this unfocused description, he proposes to address issues of disparities comparing different culture groups across widely dissimilar political, geographical and historical circumstances. He myopically proceeds to present fragmentary examples of differences that are designated as racial disparities over the past 150 years. Sowell’s work shows little consideration for contextual peculiarities and no consideration for the self-understanding of those persons whose behavior he chooses to label and characterize.

According to Domhoff, sociologists generally divide classes into two types: economic and social. Economic class is determined by the amount and type of income, and whether or not one is a business owner or a wage earner. However, social class is established by lifestyle and personal associations. Some overlap exists and both types of classes are seemingly interrelated. However, it is also possible for two persons to have the same income and occupy the same economic class, yet have no common or similar associations in terms of club memberships, civic associations or network of friends and family relations, thus occupy two completely different social classes. The extremities of the two types of classes tend to merge. People in the uppermost economic class, or the top 1 percent of income earners, also tend to associate together. Domhoff’s approach moves beyond generalized descriptions and effectively operationalizes definitions that give analytically significant designations. By comparing associations such as

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club memberships, occupations, membership on the board of directors of major companies, and top government posts, Domhoff develops a method for tracking networks of relationships among the power elite. Using this basis he is able to give a functional definition of the ruling class in America and demonstrate its impact on public policy.\textsuperscript{11}

Carmichael and Hamilton define racism as the “predication of decisions and policies on consideration of race for the purpose of \textit{subordinating} a racial group and maintaining control over that group.”\textsuperscript{12} They then describe racism as operating both overtly and covertly with individual and institutional modes of action. The two forms are related in that institutional racism is reliant on individual anti-black attitudes, but the operation of institutional racism also reinforces such attitudes. Individual racism is often obvious, but institutional racism is, “…subtle, less identifiable…but no less destructive of human life…it originates in the operation of established and respected forces in society, and thus receives far less condemnation than [individual racism].”\textsuperscript{13} Racial discrimination then results from patterns of racist behavior which act to systematically exclude some from access to opportunities while enhancing access to those same opportunities for others. The discussions of Carmichael and Hamilton treat black and white racial identities as historically constructed collectives which draw criticisms from those who prefer to selectively problematize and atomize social identities. However, their descriptive understanding has the advantage of being congruent with commonly reported self-identifications, which are chronologically traceable, and they further provide us with conceptual tools needed to systematically examine racial discrimination and its effects.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 4 – 5.
\end{itemize}
**Historical Background of Disparities in America**

According to James Stewart, “…the exploitation of enslaved Africans was especially vital to the development and performance of the United States (US) economy,” in the 18th and 19th centuries.\(^{14}\) Enslaved labor on southern plantations produced sugar, molasses, cotton and indigo which fueled northern textile mills and distilleries while the intercontinental importation of the enslaved nourished the ship-building industry. All of this economic activity was underwritten or financed by investment banking concerns and insurance companies which in turn profited greatly. Immense personal fortunes garnered from slaveholding were invested in purchasing real estate in urban areas, building luxurious residences and even for endowing prestigious academic institutions including Harvard and Princeton Universities.\(^ {15}\) The enslaved were worked not only in plantation fields, but many became skilled artisans and craftsmen in urban areas. Some of the skilled enslaved were permitted to hire themselves out and obliged to periodically make predetermined payments to the slaveholder, thereby instituting a form of perpetual debt bondage.

The experiences of deprivation and systematic exploitation did not end with the end of slavery. In the 1890s whites began to re-impose a regime of frank white supremacy throughout the south where most blacks lived. A doctrine of separate but equal was devised, and stipulations for the racial segregation of public facilities were instituted. Invidious systems of sharecropping, tenant farming and prison labor continued the large scale expropriation of black labor well into the 20th century and did not end until the onset of World War II.


As Jones relates the perpetuation of discriminatory differential treatments would not have been possible without institutionalization of the ideology of white supremacy:

…the ideological justification for the superordination of whites is the institutionalized belief in the inherent superiority of that group. This condition cannot be overemphasized. It says that it is not their late arrival, their patterns of migration, their numerical strength, nor their cultural patterns which, beginning with Jamestown and continuing to the present, have underlain the differential treatment of blacks; it says that any attempt to explain the black political experience in terms of any one or a combination of these will be insufficient.\(^\text{16}\)

Robert Smith adds that the imposition of these unequal conditions could only have been maintained and enforced using “extraordinary violence.”\(^\text{17}\) Smith goes on to observe that in more recent times frank expressions of white supremacy have declined, but more subtle patterns of racism persist. Thus, racial discrimination in America has proven to be quite adaptable over time and highly resistant against all legal maneuvers employed against it. Discrimination against blacks continues insidiously through ingenious innovations and under stealthy forms and guises. All of which serves to obscure discriminatory behaviors and render causal links of disparities much more difficult to study, track and analyze.

**Critique of a Conservative Argument**

Walter Williams does not doubt that there is racial discrimination in America. He does however take issue with the effects of discrimination, and the policies used to combat it.

Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, many of the seemingly intractable problems encountered by a significant number of black Americans do not result from racial discrimination. This is not to say that discrimination does not exist. Nor is it to say that


discrimination has no adverse effects. For policy purposes, however, the issue is not whether discrimination exists, but the extent which it explains what we see today.\(^\text{18}\)

The implementation of assistance programs by the federal government precipitated the crisis in the black family, according to Williams. It was not slavery and discrimination which have devastated the black family, but policies of the federal government promoting welfare and the minimum wage. Black households just out of slavery were more likely to be composed of two parents than the black poor of today. The “dramatic breakdown” of the black family did not occur until the 1960s.

We can see the effects of welfare on the work experience of poor families. In 1959, 31.5 percent of heads of poor families worked full-time year-round; by 1989, the percentage had fallen to 16.2 percent. In 1959, 30.5 percent did not work at all (either full-time or part-time); by 1989 that figure had risen to 50.8 percent. Some argue that such high unemployment stems from lack of job opportunities in the inner city. That observation is questionable. During 1979 – 1980, the National Bureau of Economic Research conducted a survey in the ghettos of Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Only a minority of the respondents were employed, yet almost as many said it was easy or fairly easy to get a job as a laborer as said it was difficult or impossible; and 71 percent said it was fairly easy to get a minimum-wage job.\(^\text{19}\)

Statistics are often used to reveal those things that are not actually so, a possibility arising from the fact that statistical quantities in and of themselves have no meaning. Numerical values receive their significance relative only to that constructed perspective wherein we choose to give them meaning. That is, when presented with statistics, proclaiming some astonishing new revelation we might do well to ask: “As compared to what?” To draw conclusions based upon a comparison of the national rates of employment for the poor from two different dates over a 30 year period with a selective survey of several large cities in still another particular year is to misuse or abuse the data. Employment numbers and the number of available jobs fluctuate continuously in all sectors of the economy and over all regions of the country. There may be

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 9.
intervening recessions and recoveries over any 30 year period, and these may be unevenly experienced across the economy. Also, people can and do move in and out of poverty over time. Due to structural changes in the economy, manufacturing jobs have steadily declined in urban areas since the 1960s. Furthermore, real wages for working Americans have not increased since the 1970s, but cost of living expenses for housing, food, education, transportation and healthcare continue to rise faster than the rate of inflation. Indicating their intelligence, many poor persons are unenthused about seeking employment in minimum wage or part-time jobs that barely earn enough to cover the cost of bus fare to work.

Williams assertion that, “...most [enslaved] black children lived in biological two-parent families,” is baseless.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, for more than two centuries enslaved African Americans were not permitted legalized marriages and neither did they have legally recognized families. Thus, any definitive assertions concerning the constitution of enslaved families made without consulting their own testimonies are ill-advised at best and deceitfully misleading at worst. Of course we do have records of slave narratives, ignored by Williams, which are replete with examples of enslaved persons who did not know one or both of their parents.\textsuperscript{21} Oftentimes it was the slaveholder himself who was one of the parents. It is unclear if Williams meant to include slaveholders together with their enslaved concubines as two parent households.

Slave breeding of young females and widespread sexual exploitation of black women by slaveholders sharply contradicts the notion of the stable nuclear enslaved family that Williams

\textsuperscript{20} Walter E. Williams, Race and Economics: How Much Can We Blame on Discrimination?, 7.

attempts to project. As Smithers relates, the formerly enslaved gave ample testimony to the practice of slave breeding:

In relation to slave-breeding practices, then, there are three main points that former slaves typically emphasized. First, slaves insisted that slave owners, overseers, and slave traders selected particularly fecund men and women to breed slaves. They insisted that these men and women were known as “studs” or “bucks,” the women as “wenches.” Second, they said that the forced breeding of slaves not only represented the commodification of slave sexuality but also created a set of dehumanizing social practices that separated the “breeding” slaves from the average field slave. Third and most enduringly, the imposition of slave-breeding regimes on black men and women separated family members and caused unquantifiable amounts of grief that last well into the twentieth century.22

The enslaved adjusted and adapted to the impositions of enslavement by attempting to retain some semblance of family life often with extended or blended family types.23 Patricia Hill Collins points out that more than a decade prior to the 1960s black scholars had already examined the constitution of black families and the effects of racial oppression:

…[Du Bois and Frazier] described the connections among higher rates of female-headed households in African American communities, the importance that women assume in Black family networks, and the persistence of Black poverty. However, neither scholar interpreted Black women’s centrality in Black families as a cause of African-American social class status. Both saw so-called matriarchal families as the outcome of racial oppression and poverty.”24

Angela Davis adds that black women played the crucial role in maintaining family life for the enslaved though often burdened by abusive conditions.25 That many of the formerly enslaved sought the security of marriages may be due to circumstances in which they could find support nowhere else in racist America. Black women of that period in particular were excluded from


many types of employment and remaining in marriage, even a bad marriage, may have been an economic necessity. The evolution of material circumstances and the liberalization of employment opportunities which also began in the 1960s permitted many to exercise their option to leave or to forego unhappy marriages.

The “dramatic breakdown in the black-family structure” can partially be attributed to adaptations made by people attempting to cope and survive in a deeply racist and hostile social environment. Single parent headed households are better than no parent headed households after all. Certainly, the grinding pressures of being constantly and pervasively discriminated against in employment, consumer services and the criminal justice system could be included as such factors.

Williams asserts that resolutions for the problems of the black poor will involve more access to free markets and the elimination of the minimum wage. He notes quite accurately, that the Davis Bacon Act of 1931 was passed not only to set a federal minimum wage for government contracted construction workers, but also to drive Black workers out of the construction industry.26

Understanding the effects of minimum wage laws requires first a few simple observations. While legislative bodies have the power to order wage increases they have not found a way to order commensurate increases in worker productivity that make the worker’s output worth the higher wage…To the extent that the minimum wage law raises a worker’s pay level that exceeds his productivity, employers, predictably make adjustments in the use of labor. Such adjustments will produce gains for some workers at the expense of others. Those workers who retain their jobs receive a higher wage gain. Most of the adverse effects are borne by workers who are most disadvantaged in terms of marketable skills. They will lose their jobs or not be hired in the first place.27

Thus poor blacks are not desirable workers and they should be paid less, and they should willingly accept lower wages, because they are unskilled and therefore less productive. This

26 Walter E. Williams, Race and Economics: How Much Can We Blame on Discrimination? 33–34.

27 Ibid., 38–39.
argument illustrates the grand possibilities of deductive absurdities achievable once one has detached a problematic condition from the historical background and social context in which it occurs. Being poor and unskilled need not exclude one from preferential treatment and such treatment may well be appropriate to address the inequities. There is in fact a long history of poor immigrant Europeans who have been given preferential treatment in their efforts to secure a foothold in the American workplace. The fact is that until the 1960s whites were provided exclusive access to programs of ‘affirmative action’ or preferences in immigration, subsidized small business loans, the right to purchase federal land at subsidized rates, the right to lease federal land to exploit oil, gas and mineral resources, and exclusive access to major federal contracts. These restricted privileges were provided through public policies with the intention of enriching a particular racial group, including many poor whites while purposefully excluding others from the possibility of similar gains.

Williams suggests that every problem encountered by a black American cannot be attributed to racial discrimination and without considering anything else, that statement might as well be true. However, people do not live as singularities, and human beings are notoriously social creatures. The problems that people face are partitioned into discrete compartments only at the great risk of significantly distorting the nature of both the problems and the people. A thoughtful consideration of the setting and social environment out of which people must live and interact is helpful since problems incurred from the surroundings and problems experienced within those surroundings are never completely separable.

Despite several interesting logical illustrations and a few well-constructed hypothetical exercises, Williams’ failure to move beyond abstract argumentation finally renders his discourse

28 Ibid., 34 – 35.
a nebulosity. This is most clearly seen as he tries to operationalize the term at the heart of his argument.

…discrimination may be operationally defined as the act of choice or selection. All selection necessarily and simultaneously requires non-selection. Choice requires discrimination...when the term discrimination is modified with the nouns race and sex, we merely specify the criterion on which the choice is made.29

Hence, to choose is to discriminate and to discriminate is to select something, but also necessarily to reject something else. Again, given no context at all, this is all well and good. Williams delivers articulate analytical propositions that are quite unable to explain the perpetuation of racial disparities favoring whites and detrimental for blacks. As every good lawyer knows one can make rigorously logical arguments and still draw conclusions that are known to be false. The goal of operationalization is not simply to measure something, but to measure something worth measuring. People make choices, but people do not choose in a vacuum. They do so within a society with pronounced cultural orientations and where there are economic pressures, political motives and personal experiences coming to bear on the choices that are made. The chronological progression from American chattel slavery to enforced racial segregation and now continuing with widespread anti-black racial discrimination cannot be explained away by eloquently delivered logical irrelevancies.

**Critique of a Leftist Argument**

Reed and Chowkwanyun reviewed recent studies and they found that while many exhibit methodological dexterity in ferreting out disparate outcomes, these studies usually conclude, unsurprisingly, that race or institutional racism is a factor in American life. They go on to suggest that these studies are beset with “interpretational pathologies” including dichotomous

determinations of race and class, overgeneralizations of white racial animosity, and failure to consider how race and racism have evolved over time.  

Simplistic use of race as the key analytic category, moreover, suggests intra-racial class uniformity and encourages monochromatic dyads. Much of the problem rests with the almost exclusive reliance on quantitative data sets, which usually limits researchers to pre-defined administrative and demographic variables while ignoring consideration of forces not captured by the data…

The authors do not deny that race is a key factor in racial disparities, but to them race seems to be overemphasized as a factor. The real aim of these authors is to stress the role that class might play a causative factor for widespread racial disparities in America. Whether class dynamics are “overarching” factors or not heavily depends upon how we define socioeconomic classes. And operationalizing the concept of socioeconomic classes would then shape any conclusions that are drawn. It would indeed be beneficial to see more studies which use class as a starting point. Also, investigating intra-racial class differences will surely bear fruit. But, such studies would also have interpretative limitations. The problematic of defining classes is just as complicated as that of defining races. Ambiguities prevail if the descriptions are too broad, and contradictions proliferate if the descriptions are too narrow. In defining socioeconomic classes one might consider lifestyles and values as well as income levels, types of income and net worth in addition to relationships to the various means of production. And all of these factors can vary with time so that class relationships are continuously transforming. Furthermore, there are significant interactions between race and class. That the attitudes and behaviors of the black

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31Ibid., 152 – 3.
middle and upper classes largely mimic those of their white counterparts would seem to be related to the racial dominance of the latter.

Reed suggests a fundamental relationship between race and class as he explores the conceptual and theoretical challenges of explaining the social realities of American history.

I propose the familiar juxtaposition of race and class forces debates about American inequality misunderstands both phenomena by treating them as fundamentally distinguishable. Instead, both are more effectively, and more accurately, seen as equivalent and overlapping elements within a singular system of social power and stratification rooted in capitalist labor relations. Hierarchies of civic status mediate and manage this stratification system by defining populations and assigning them ascriptively to what come to be understood as appropriate niches of civic worth and entitlement. These hierarchies evolve and are enforced formally through laws, public policies and quasi-official means …

Thus, it is not possible to disentangle race and class in America since these two ascriptive designations mutually reproduce and reinforce one another. Reed provides a nuanced and thoughtful discussion of the dynamic relationship between race and class. But, his approach tends to obviate motive factors that make considerable contributions to the maintenance of comprehensive systems of domination and control.

In a review of interracial cooperation among labor activists in the 1890s Reed finds that such associations were only prevented by the harshest means.

…notwithstanding the pervasiveness of ideologies of racial hierarchy and attitudes that would today properly be understood as racist, elimination of potentially consequential interracial political solidarities formed on the basis of shared practical, largely class-based concerns required elite led putsches that “purified” the electorate of blacks and many poor whites and imposed harsh legal and moral sanctions – including freely applied, officially condoned violence – on transgressions of the apartheid like regime they installed.  


33 Ibid., 266.
This line of reasoning provides a weak, superficial and unconvincing explanation of the enduring and profound role that racism has played in America. The domination fixation emanating from the cultural core of the controlling group is left unexamined. Dismantling and preventing biracial coalitions among working class people could just as easily be viewed a useful adjuvant activity to the primary objective of sustaining the ruling racial class.

The all-pervading cultural impetus to dominate others, as the anthropologist Marimba Ani suggests, might be a determining factor.34 The goal then would not just be control over the means of economic production, but control period. For the ruthless mindset restlessly driven to dominance and supremacy, an enterprise need not be financially profitable in order to be deemed worthwhile; exploitation can thus be a secondary consequence to the psychopath’s will to power.

The agreed upon fiction of Western capitalist democracies holds that power of authoritative coercion and state sanctioned violence are exercised for the public good and by consent of the governed. In reality only those with access to sufficient capital to maintain a controlling stake in the means of production are endowed with the privileges and rights to give such consent. Those without capital have no rights, only permissions or conditional privileges which may be unilaterally reduced or rescinded although sometimes with the pretense of due process.

The exercise of raw power and brute force violence does not require a rational basis beyond desire for its perpetuation. Prominent business corporations like major financial holding companies, outsized investment banks, large scale media concerns and even nation-states have been able to operate successfully for long periods of time without ever turning a profit or balancing a budget. They may even eventually be declared net losers or bankrupt. Yet, it is their

pronounced capacities to control the flow and operation of commerce, resources or information and to manipulate or intimidate populations which make them viable and value enterprises to those obsessively seeking domination over others.

Reed and Chokwanyun correctly observe that social understandings and designations of race and racism have changed over time. But, an investigation seeking to understand diachronic transformations must also be careful to note those forms or relationships which somehow resist change and endure over time. It is observed that a particular group, identifiable by class and by race, has maintained effective control of the American political economy. The power, prestige and prominence of the most privileged group of white Americans has remained invariant across the entirety of American history. In fact many of the most wealthy and powerful families in the United States can trace their elite status lineage back to the antebellum period, some going back to the colonial era.\(^\text{35}\) And so we may conclude that relative to American history, domination and control are not race neutral, and race is then a primary determinant of outcomes in the American political economy, though always mitigated or attenuated by class, gender and other factors. Neither the fact that a few blacks, by closely aligning themselves with influential whites, sometimes attain an elite class privileged status, nor the fact that at any given time 10 percent or so of the white population find themselves in desperate financial straits invalidate the conclusion of racial primacy.

Critique of a Structural Argument

Robert C. Smith posits that racial discrimination is an organized institutional practice which then systematically results in disparities. He employs the concept of racism as given by Carmichael and Hamilton which describes racism as essentially a power dynamic that enforces dominant/subordinate relationships and which can be expressed individually or via institutional controls and procedures. Institutional racism then is identifiable whenever we can observe that policies result in systematically negative outcomes for blacks or other minorities. Smith explains:

…institutional racism is understood as policies and practices that, controlling for social class, subordinate blacks or maintain or “freeze” them in a subordinate position…the concept focuses on the effects of a decision, not its intent. A decision, policy, or practice that is nominally nonracist, sincerely so, may nevertheless be racist in its consequences or effects.36

By controlling for class Smith attempted to distinguish the effects of racism from those of class differences since disparate outcomes can be the result of either. He notes: “…much of what may appear to be institutional racism is simply the effects of routine class bias in a market economy.”37 Smith does not explicitly define or describe what he means by a class, but based upon the studies he reviews we presume that he refers primarily to income levels. In any event, as Reed suggests race and class, howsoever defined, will most certainly be inter-influencing phenomena and we doubt that any method of data disaggregation will be able to completely distinguish the effects of one from the other. Nevertheless, Smith’s approach to extrapolating the effects of institutional racism by controlling for class is a promising method for investigating patterns of discriminatory behavior and systemic structural racism. We may inquire if wealthy blacks experience less negative outcomes than do poor blacks. The results of such an inquiry

36 Ibid., 53.
37 Ibid.
might point to some class bias, but they would neither confirm nor disconfirm the presence of institutional racism. A more revealing question would be: How do relatively well-off blacks compare in terms of outcomes with similarly disposed whites? Should disparities disadvantaging blacks prevail across socioeconomic classes then the argument for structural impositions racism is strengthened.

Disparate outcomes due to discriminatory procedures and practices in education, employment, housing, health and consumer services are examined by reference to examples. Standardized testing results from college placement exams and IQ tests have been used to deny access to educational opportunities. Test results are also used to promote stereotypical notions of black inferiority. He also reviews several examples of discriminatory practices in employment and how institutional procedures that are seemingly race neutral can be employed in order to enforce the racially subordinate status on Blacks. Disparities in the treatment of various types of diseases in the healthcare system are also noted. Additionally, blacks are frequently offered higher rates for home mortgages and higher prices for automobiles than whites of the same economic class. Thus, institutional racism is demonstrated at work across the American economic landscape.38

The issue of inferiorization is addressed in a manner incongruous with the main topic. The impact of the Black Power Movement on consciousness and racial identity is traced. Smith then reviews conceptual problems in attempting to study self-hatred among blacks and notes a difference between personal and collective self-esteem. He states that many blacks use referents other than race to gauge their self-esteem and thus they have high levels of personal self-esteem while showing little or no pride in race. He cites empirical studies claiming to show that some Blacks have higher self-esteem scores than comparable whites. Smith goes on to note examples

38 Ibid., 54 – 75.
of color conscious discrimination or intra-racial discrimination among blacks. The author does not provide any evidence that directly relates inferiorization to disparate outcomes.\(^{39}\)

Further investigations seem to be in order here. Observance of a group of people targeted for negative discriminatory treatment, but who nevertheless experience high levels of personal self-esteem because they decline to identify with the characteristic that is the focus of discrimination against them, suggests the occurrence of an interesting phenomenon. Inferiorization could be conceptualized as resulting in an irrational abhorrence against working productively with others of one’s own ethnicity or race. The impaired ability to engage in cooperative activities serves to weaken efforts to build and maintain economic, educational and political institutions needed for collective survival which must precede any individual achievements. This condition might be expected among those subjected to an environment of pervasive discriminatory activity devaluing their humanity. The failure to engender identification with the collective racial referent leaves the group unable to organize politically and effectively counter racial discriminatory practices applied against them. Self-destructive behavior is usually considered indicative of a disorder. Given pervasive anti-black discrimination, the denial of racial identity might itself be an indicator of some kind of psychosocial malady.

Finally, the author concludes his most informative and thoughtful review on a decidedly gloomy downbeat note:

…I do not see any realistic or politically feasible strategies or policies to deal with the problem…the civil rights revolution represented a frontal attack on the doctrine of white supremacy, but it did not destroy what [King] called the “monster” of racism itself…virtually all of the talent and resources of the leadership of black America have been devoted to integration or incorporation into the institutions of the American polity, while the core community it purports to lead has become increasingly segregated, and its

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 88 – 100.
society, economy, culture, and institutions of internal governance and communal uplift have decayed...there is little prospect – at least in the near term – for the development of a politics or the adoption of policies that effectively deal with the interrelated problems of racism and poverty in the United States.\textsuperscript{40}

And so the author leaves us with no productive propositions, promising policy prescriptions or positive programmatic prospects. Even so, as Smith pointed out himself, all of the negative factors of social decadence deleteriously affecting the black community are also working their corrosive effects on all other racial and ethnic communities, though perhaps to varying degrees of difference. Rather than bemoaning our collective fate, we might well find it more beneficial and perhaps less depressing, to plan patiently and study intently while remaining ever watchful for the inevitable opportunities of remediation and redress.

\textbf{Conclusions}

The arguments of Sowell and Williams revolve around two basic truisms: 1) not all differences or disparities are due to discrimination and 2) improvements in individual behavior, stronger work ethics and the acquisition of skills or more education will result in improved outcomes. What both authors assiduously avoid, however, is a critical examination of the structural relationships of domination and exploitation implicit in the persistence of racially discriminatory practices that both authors acknowledge do exist. Structural relationships determine that one group will regularly, systematically and comprehensively extract resources, services and labor from another group in order to enrich itself. Such structural relationships also allow the dominant group to suppress any demands for redress of the grossly unequal allocation of resources. It is this predacious parasitical imposition by the dominant group, demonstrable across American history, which makes racial discrimination a primary cause of disparities.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 141 – 143.
The culture of poverty notion advanced by conservatives to explain disparities in social outcomes is simply not creditable. It can be said that some poor blacks are lazy, inclined to criminal activities and sexually maladjusted, but the very same can be said with equal conviction about some well off whites. Moreover, since the wealthy have ready access to means and facilities allowing them to mask and conceal their negative proclivities we might suspect that the prevalence of social deviance amongst them is greatly underreported. Meanwhile any hint of pathological behavior among the black poor is subjected to research studies and media depictions exposing the most lurid details in the lives of society’s most vulnerable people. Often these reports turn out to be grossly exaggerated such as the ‘crack babies’ hysteria of the 1990s. Nevertheless, surveys reveal that abuse of pharmaceutical drugs and alcohol occurs less often among the poor than among those better off. Also, studies indicate that child sexual abuse has about the same prevalence among the economically disadvantaged as among those of higher socioeconomic classes, i.e. sexual abuse has no relation to class. Indeed one might well wonder if the ‘spiritual poverty’ of those wealthy and well off, with all of their material advantages, does not constitute a more damning moral indictment than any which might be pronounced upon those frequently discriminated against and materially impoverished.

In our theoretical imaginations anything might be true, and everything could be false, we need only imagine it and then devise a rationale to allege that it is so. However, the challenge of serious social science is to relate concepts and theoretical propositions to conditions in which people actually live; conditions involving interrelationships that may be very complex, which are usually multifaceted, and which may not lend themselves to precise quantifiable delimitations. Yet, the propositions ought to be consistent with empirical observations. They may also be

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suggestive of public policy implications, and preferably one should make policy suggestions without sacrificing one’s personal integrity in the process. We may thereby hope to enhance possibilities of correcting gross imbalances and significantly improve our social conditions. But, some have shabbily submitted themselves to the service of masking the multitudinous modes, means, and methods of oppressive power.

A more serious examination of disparate outcomes is engaged by leftist theorists. Class conflict alone, however, is not sufficient to explain the persistence and intensity of racial disparities. Bohmer found that class-based theories were able to reliably explain the history and perpetuation of capitalism. However, he also points out that class dominance theories generally downplay the autonomous role that blacks play in the struggle against oppression and exploitation. Furthermore, class dominance theories have yet to provide, “…a convincing explanation of why white workers often accept or support racial inequality and racist ideology.”\(^{42}\) He observes that Marxist views tend to be reductionist and lead to an economic determinism in which, “…economy determines politics, culture, consciousness, and struggles of society; it minimizes the autonomous role of culture and race.”\(^{43}\)

Class conflict dynamics informed by the concentrated elite class-domination as suggested by G. William Domhoff, and combined with the equivalent component of systematic and ideologically based racial dominance as proposed by Mack Jones may be able to consistently explain racially disparate outcomes. Domhoff explains that the American power elite which manages the system of control is a group of select professionals with roots in the ruling classes, but which can and will incorporate talented outsiders from the lower classes. But, the elite social class is much more exclusive. Composed of extended interrelated families, selective bloodlines


\(^{43}\) Ibid.
or “blue bloods” socialize in exclusive gatherings, which allow the social elite to “…instill a class awareness that includes feelings of superiority, pride and justified privilege. Deep down most members of the upper class think they are better than other people…”

Although Domhoff barely mentions race, class-dominant elite theory necessarily leads us back to race as a primary factor in the system of domination and control. This is so because the American ruling class is essentially and overwhelmingly, if not entirely, composed of members from one particular racial group, a circumstance which has remained constant for the entirety of American history. Due to the fact that the ruling class is unequivocally racially identifiable, privileges of identity and rank descend to all others who share in that collective identity including those in the lower classes. Whites then across all lines of class, gender and sexual behavior derive and enjoy opportunities they would not necessarily have otherwise.

From the beginning the system of racial oppression was designed to bring a range of benefits to white Americans. The society rooted in slavery provided whites with many undeserved social, economic, political, and cultural advantages. Once the frame work of unjust impoverishment and enrichment was created under slavery, the white leadership of the new nation, strongly supported by the average white man and woman, set into motion the segregative and discriminatory means for perpetuating the enrichment and impoverishment across generations…Most white Americans underestimate not only the level of their privileges but the degree to which these privileges exist because they have been passed down from their families and ancestors.

The drive to reproduce power relationships and the dynamics of intergenerational transfers ensures the propagation of racial domination. Power is transferred from one generation to the next via the handover of properties, resources and influence by investiture with positions of institutional dominance. Quite often these transfers occur between those within the same family, overwhelmingly to those within the same ethnic or racial group, and always to those who

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are socialized into a similar worldview and similar cultural values. Disruptions may occur only where there is usurpation, a military conquest or a successful mass revolt ending with the overthrow of the ruling class.

Historically, white supremacy developed in tandem with capitalism and the two are closely intertwined, mutually supportive and practically inseparable. Some leftist cling to an economic determinism and continue to view class conflict as ultimately the sole primary factor causing disparities; if we move beyond capitalism then we will move beyond racism. The racism experienced by African descendent people in declared Marxist-socialist states casts doubt upon this view.46 Genuine concern for the most marginalized and exploited people requires serious consideration of the possibility of racist imperatives beyond economic motivations. If racism is determined to be more than a transitory diversion then we might want to take a closer look at Derrick Bell’s racial realism and the racial domination dynamics of Mack Jones.

The paradox of American politics is that while an elite and racially uniform class dominates public policies it would be untrue to say that average citizens, the masses, and outgroups like blacks, have no influence. The influence of the masses may be inconsistent, irregular and unpredictable, but it is nevertheless real, as the study any number of protest movements will reveal. Substantive transformation of disparate conditions, as unlikely as this may sometimes seem, is not an impossibility.

Bibliography


