

THE RACIAL STATE OF THE UNION: understanding race and racial inequality in the United States of America

*Aldon Morris**
*Vilna Bashi Treitler***

This paper, “The Racial State of the Union,” interrogates the role of race and racism in the United States of America. The paper grapples with race conceptually as it explores why racial categories and racial inequality exist in the first place. We also examine the current state of race in North America by laying bare its social, economic and political manifestations. After exploring the magnitude of racial inequality in the United States, we labor to unravel the mechanisms both structurally and culturally that perpetuate and sustain racial disparities. Because racist actions and beliefs have always been resisted by social movements, action, and resistance at the personal level, we assess the nature and outcomes of struggles to overthrow North American racism. We conclude by assessing the current prospects for racial transformation and the possibilities for the emergence of racial equality. Thus, in “The Racial State of the Union” we provide an overarching analysis of the current state of racial dynamics in the United States and the forces determined to dismantle racism.

KEYWORDS: Race. Racism. Racial regimes. Black movements. United States.

INTRODUCTION

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, and the language of liberty and equality in the nation’s founding documents, the United States of America embraced racism from its inception. In 2017, the former first black Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, stated, “We forget in the United States how long it has taken us to make ‘We the People’ mean people like me, [...] And indeed, I do think that America was born with a birth defect: it was slavery” (Condoleezza Rice, CBS’s “Sunday Morning”, 2017).

Indeed, throughout the nation’s nearly 250-year existence, white elites in the United States deliberately constructed and sustained a society based on white supremacy. The first settlers from Europe developed a white settler nation by genocide against the indigenous people living in North America, forcefully seizing and through trickery stealing their lands and

destroying their nations. This was the fate of those we called “Indians” (Cf. the horrendous navigation errors of the infamous Christopher Columbus/Cristóvão Colombo) as well as Mexicans who had portions of Mexico forcefully annexed by European settlers. These stolen lands were slowly included in their “new” nation even as the peoples on those lands were unwelcome, unless they could be enslaved and forced to work for the benefit of colonizers who began to call themselves white and invent races for others who they wanted to exclude from their polity. Further, Africans were made black by being ripped from their continent, transported to America on slave ships, chained and forced to labor as slaves receiving no compensation – and this continued for two and a half centuries. The wealth of the nation was established as white elites exploited economically, socially and politically those others they defined as nonwhite. Indeed, black labor is what transformed the United States from an economy that looked much like today’s poorest countries, into an economic giant with a booming agricultural economy (Steinberg, 2001), and nonwhite labor has brought it to its

* Northwestern University, Department of Sociology. 1810 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, Illinois, 60208, EUA. amorris@northwestern.edu

** University of California. Department of Black Studies. 3631 South Hall, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA. vbashitreitler@ucsb.edu

current state where its economy rivals other white empires in Western Europe with colonial histories.

In sum, European colonizers fashioned races of themselves and other humans, creating their own white supremacy as they built a racial hierarchy and subjected us all to it (Mills, 1999). White settlers ensured that domination, white supremacy and privilege, phenotype and skin color categorization, and exploitation, all intertwined, however sloppily or illogically. Thus, certain Northern Europeans and their descendants retained their place at the top of the racial hierarchy, elaborated systems of racial classification and created racial beliefs along with systems of sanction for those who failed to comply with racial logics. How did whites arrange social life so that they would stand as the dominant “race”? What is race anyway? And how do racial categories incorporate nonwhite others, especially as new peoples emerge through conquest, migration, or identity movements? How does a dominant group, creating hierarchies of humans and systems of racial logics that ensures white racial domination, endure for centuries? If we are to make sense of the contemporary racial landscape in the United States, addressing these questions are crucial. The sciences (both natural and social) have made great strides in providing answers to these vexing issues. In this next section, we review the answers.

WHAT IS RACE AND HOW DOES IT OPERATE IN THE USA?

Race is a system of human classification meant to sort humans into distinct categories according to a constellation of physical, cognitive, and cultural traits believed to be hereditary, distinctive, and largely inescapable (Bashi Treitler, 2016). But humans logically cannot be sorted in this way. We have not lived long enough on the planet to make biologically different subspecies that we can call races

(Gould, 1994). There is no biological or genetic trait that definitively marks an individual as a member of one racial group and no other; nor is there any marker that clearly identifies all the members of a single racial groups as distinct from all other racial groups (King, J., 1981). Indeed, more than 100 years of scientific evidence has shown that human races (i.e., racial subspecies denoted by phenotype and other genetic/biological characteristics) do not exist. The belief in the ability to scientifically categorize humans (i.e., racialism) derives from faith in positivism (the belief that knowledge comes from scientific methods that can be accurately, empirically applied to human behavior). However, positivism is simply a belief, as is racialism; neither belief system can render the idea of race and racialism scientifically valid.

In the United States, we tend to think that we have four racial groups: White, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and Black. That classification scheme means somehow kinky haired people are classifiable as White, or as Black; dark skinned people are sometimes Asian and sometimes Black; and each group has people with thick lips and people with thin lips. Genetic material fares no better at sorting races than our own eyes are, but some natural scientists are still searching for a reliable tool for racial sorting and many hope that the sorting of human genomes will finally get us there.

Knowing that there is no scientifically valid way to sort humans into races, social scientists are increasingly concluding that race is a social construction. This means that races are human-made fictions, creations of the human mind based on factors having no meaning independent of those we construct and (some of us) agree upon. The most common classification schemes employ phenotype: racialists (and racists) believe that people with certain physical characteristics (hair texture or curl, degree/absence of melanin in the skin, color of the eye’s iris, thick-/thinness of lip) can be assigned to a “race.” Social actors decide to

use phenotypic characteristics to assign people to races as they declare those sorted to be racially alike. Nevertheless, in making racial assignments among people we must nonsensically ignore the overwhelming list of things that divide them, including their nation of birth, language, culture, parentage and ancestry. (For example, in the USA, we illogically claim the offspring of a “White” person and a “Black” person must be “Black” because of our adherence to a rule of racial hypodescent for anyone with any degree of “blackness” – that is, unless they look “white” enough and simply live their lives as such to avoid detection as a black person.) Racial categories are in constant use in the USA, even as they change over time. In the US, racial identification is asked on paper forms in daily life: job applications, health questionnaires, admission applications for schooling, even access to buildings on visitors’ logs! As mentioned, most in the US would say there are around four categories: White, Asian (and Pacific Islander), Latino/Latina, and Black. What is critical about race (as opposed to ethnicity or other ways of sorting humans) is that racial categories are organized hierarchically, with whites in the highest position and blacks in the lowest.

Even as race is proclaimed a “social construction,” this construction has major consequences. North Americans have a common set of ideas about how to label a person as a member of a given racial category, a racial commonsense, if you will. That commonsense not only provides information about how to racially read someone, but dictates expectations about their behavior, and how they believe they should behave toward racial others. Should expectations about racial comportment be unmet, racial sanctions ensue. These can be mild – as when a family member disapproves of a loved one’s choice to reach across the racial divide to make a friend or choose a lover – or they can be strict and costly – as when someone finds themselves in the grasp of members of a hate group who see themselves as mem-

bers of a racial militia meant to uphold a strict racial order. These tenets that organize racial order – racial categories, hierarchies, commonsense, and sanction – can be said to make up the US racial paradigm (Bashi Treitler, 2016).

Generally, people in the US who believe in races have largely gravitated away from the tenets of early biological or natural science notions of race. They, instead, have moved toward the belief that racial designations signal group character. This is only progress of a sort because North Americans have not moved away from biological notions altogether. Most North Americans – including scientists – are far more deeply invested in racialized thinking than we might expect, and biological essentialism is even more prevalent than is the idea that race is merely a social construction (Morning, 2011). As North Americans examine ancestry and ethnicity, they determine (in actions and words) that these concepts, too, are race-bound (Bashi Treitler, 1996, 2014). We embrace the belief that race has real meaning (perhaps in producing aptitudes and propensities for attaining economic success, parenting skill, or criminal behavior) that can be applied to racial groups despite the varied and messy ways of sorting humans (first through physical appearance, blood, and more recently, genes) into ever changing and nebulous racial categories (Morning, 2011). To be sure, antiracists must fight against all these inequalities and the beliefs that undergird them (Kendi, 2016).

In 1860, Senator Jefferson Davis’s delivered his infamous speech on the senate floor, which argued against federal funding for Black education, declaring that racial difference was stamped from the beginning by a government “not founded by negroes nor for negroes [but] by white men for white men” (Kendi, 2016, p. 2). The US Civil War would begin the next year, and end in 1865 with the manumission of those made black by racial slavery. The historic racial fictions that made racial slavery a reality continue to shape contemporary race inequalities. Indeed, racial inequalities and the beliefs that

justify them haunt US history and shape our socioeconomic policy and behaviors to this day. They inform how we understand each other as ethnic beings, molding our knowledge of who belongs in the nation and who will never be included, and fashioning our judgements about whether we can blame racial hierarchy or the socially excluded for their plight (Bashi Treitler, 2014, 2016). Let us briefly examine where this fallacy of racial thought has left us, two centuries after Davis's declaration.

THE CURRENT STATE OF RACIAL AFFAIRS IN THE USA

North American racial inequalities are evident when human life begins, and remain throughout the lives of racialized beings in the USA. Thus, it makes sense to begin by talking about racial inequalities in birth and death. The USA is notoriously poor among the world's more economically developed nations in caring for its newborns and new mothers, having fallen in rank from 6th to 26th over the last 50 years (Matoba; Collins, 2017). Each year, 23,000 infants in the US die before they reach their first birthday. This outcome is racially influenced because overwhelming numbers of these deaths are nonwhite. In the nation's capital, Washington DC, the poorest district (Ward 8, where black residents predominate) has an infant mortality rate that is 10 times that of the wealthiest (Ward 3 overwhelmingly white). On the opposite coast, in San Francisco, black mothers are 8 times more likely to suffer the death of their infant than their white counterparts – and it has become clear that it is racism, and not just the fact of living in separate racial categories, that cause these disparities in risk of early death (Carpenter, 2017). Although the overall rate of infant mortality has declined since 1950, the gap between mortality rates for white and black children actually increased over the subsequent four decades (Singh; Yu, 1995) and now is at the point where 50% more black children

than white children die in the first year of life (Firger, 2017). Should African Americans survive childhood, they have the fewest years of life expectancy (74.6) of all racial groups, where Asian and Latino Americans are expected to live the longest, at 86.5 and 82.8 years respectively, and whites 78.9 years (Kaiser Foundation, 2009).

The quality of life one lives between birth and death is severely unequally distributed among the “races.” For example, Black and indigenous (“American Indians” and Alaska Natives) fare far worse than whites on the majority of measures of health, while Latinos and Asians (particularly certain Asian ethnic groups) fare worse on some measures and better on others. Nonelderly nonwhites are far more likely to be without health insurance coverage that might promote better health (Artiga et al., 2016). However,

Racial and ethnic disparities in health care exist even when insurance status, income, age, and severity of conditions are comparable. And because death rates from cancer, heart disease, and diabetes are significantly higher in racial and ethnic minorities than in whites, these disparities are unacceptable (Nelson, 2002, p. 6).

In the USA, races live segregated lives, and all major cities in the US are hyper-segregated, meaning that racial segregation is glaringly evident no matter how it is measured. Segregation is a contributing factor to a host of problems, not least of which is environmental racism, meaning that compared to whites black people suffer from higher levels of exposure to toxins both because of geographic segregation and companies that actually pollute more areas where blacks live (Newkirk, 2018).

The United States has also made itself infamous in its global position as the world's top jailer of its own people, a position it has held since 2002 (Tsai; Scommegna, 2012). Men make up 90 percent of those jailed, to the degree where one of every four US women has an imprisoned loved one – and for black women the number is significantly higher, at 44%,

whereas only 12% of white women and 6% of white men have the same fate (Lee et al., 2015). Young black men between the ages of 18 and 34 were six times more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts (Tsai; Scomegna, 2012). The disproportionate numbers of nonwhites incarcerated and caught in the clutches of the criminal justice system have devastating effects on their communities (Alexander, 2010). Having a criminal record makes it exceedingly difficult for ex-inmates of color to attain employment (Pager, 2003). The high incarceration rate severely limits the marriageable pool for women of color negatively affecting family income and family stability (Wilson, 1987). Moreover, incarceration often leads to political disenfranchisement of black people to such an extent that scholars are beginning to label it as the reincarnation of a new Jim Crow regime of oppression (Alexander, 2010). It is fair to conclude that racially biased mass incarceration of people of color in America exacerbates racial oppression in the contemporary United States to appalling levels.

Other quality of life measures show similarly skewed racial disparities. Stanford University's Center on Poverty and Inequality (CPI)'s 2017 annual report focused on 10 areas of inequality (employment, poverty, safety net use, housing, education, incarceration, health, earnings, wealth, and mobility) and concluded that (1) profound inequalities exist and persist in many of these domains, (2) the gaps between dominant whites and nonwhites are substantial, and declines in the magnitudes of these gaps are slowing or ceasing altogether. African American employment among men has been lower than for all other men for as long as records of employment have been collected; their employment currently registers at 11 to 15 percent lower than for white men, and this has been the case for every month since January 2000. Full recovery in employment after the 2008 Great Recession reached all areas of the population except for African American men (Hout, 2017). The staying power of employ-

ment also marks racial disparities: while only 1 in 18 whites fear job losses within a year, 1 in 9 African Americans and 1 in 6 Hispanic Americans have those fears. Those African Americans who are employed face inequality in wages, and poverty marks the group as a whole. Right after the Civil Rights Movement, some gains were made in narrowing the earnings gap, but even now, median earnings for black males are 32 percent lower than for white males – in four decades the earnings gap narrowed only 7 percent. At the same time, the median earnings gap between white and Hispanic males actually grew from 29 percent to 42 percent, mainly because anti-immigrant legislation actually increased inequality (Grusky et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, whites and Asians face the lowest rates of poverty in the nation (at 11.5% and 11.2% respectively), while black, indigenous and Hispanic rates of poverty are 24%, 27%, and 21% respectively (Grusky et al., 2017). These high poverty groups rely more upon the country's social safety net. Homeownership is the North American family's bank account, storing most of family wealth, and activating welfare benefits like mortgage interest deductions, real estate and property tax exclusions, and other homeowner subsidies. Black, Hispanic and indigenous families are respectively 57%, 51% and 41% less likely than white families to own a mortgaged home. The burden of paying for housing under employment and wage gaps is considerable: 20% of black and Hispanic renters spend over half their income on housing, and are at comparably greater risk of eviction. By contrast, 1 in 6 black or Hispanic homeowners spend half their income on housing, whereas the comparable figure for white homeowners is 1 in 12 (Grusky et al., 2017).

Nonwhites and whites not only live wholly different lives, but have polar opposite views of what is going on here. A Tufts University study (Norton; Sommers, 2011, p. 215), showed that "Whites believe that they have replaced blacks as the primary victims of ra-

cial discrimination in contemporary America”. Moreover, for them, gains by black persons are associated with perceived anti-white biases in a racial zero-sum game. Indeed, whites see nonwhite gains as “reverse racism” and believe it to be a bigger problem than anti-black racism! Black perceptions are quite different - black people in the US do not perceive a zero-sum game at play, and they believe that no such losses occur should they make gains in their struggles for equality.

Which came first, racist action or racial thought? That is up for debate. Some argue that we would not even have races if humans did not insist on inequality between themselves and those they believe to be racially beneath them – in other words, some scholars suggest that racial inequality *causes* us to believe in and see racial differences among humans (Fields; Fields, 2014). If they are right, making “races” equal would go a long way in solving America’s racial problems. It makes sense, then, to examine the fight against “racial disparities [that] are older than the life of the United States” (Kendi, 2016, p. 2). In this next section, we survey that fight by chronicling a history of U.S. anti-racist movements and their achievements.

RACE REGIMES AND RESISTANCE: Slavery, Jim Crow, Contemporary Racial Oppression

As noted, race was invented by Europeans who called themselves white and placed themselves in a position of supremacy, and conversely created blacks who they subordinated into racial slavery. The American slave regime closely approximated an iron cage of human domination (Morris, 1993). Scholars of American slavery (Aptheker, 1974; Franklin, 1967) concur that racial slavery was a comprehensive system of human bondage. The slave system utilized harsh measures – murder, whippings, brutal forms of punishments, restricted travel

and social intercourse, imposed ignorance, ideological and mental violence, and constant monitoring – to maintain the slave regime. American slavery endured for over two centuries because as Aptheker (1974, p. 67) argued “Behind the owner, and his personal agents, stood an elaborate and complex system of military control [...] practically all adult white men were liable for patrol service”. The system also endured because the aristocracy used the white working classes as controlling overseers whom they rewarded with meager incomes and a modest status based on the claim they were better than Nigger slaves (Du Bois, 1935). Thus, through the brutal exploitation of slaves, the southern white aristocracy amassed enormous wealth and built an elaborate empire rooted in cotton, tobacco, and other valuable commodities. European elites also relied on black slavery in America and elsewhere, to feed their greedy developing empires. Under slavery, black skin and white domination became commingled, culminating in an enduring feature of an American society that inflicted racial terror on nonwhites while proclaiming that “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Jefferson, 1776).

African Americans have always engaged in individual and collective protests against racial oppression. Black resistance to slavery began on slave ships during the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean. On ships, slave catchers and their overseers had to be forever watchful to prevent rebellions and control those that exploded under challenging circumstances. In many cases, rebellious slaves took over slave ships, killed white captors, and sailed back to Africa. Some ships were forever lost at sea when slave rebellions threw them off course. It was also common for slaves to leap overboard choosing death rather than endure slavery in a strange land. Indeed, black protest against slavery was born on slave ships

because their human cargo fought relentlessly for their freedom.

Landed slaves rebelled on North America soil despite the hostile brutality and intense surveillance that accompanied their slave condition. Through protests, slaves raised the costs of their racial denigration and the terror it took to keep them subordinated, rendering the cruel institution a risky and dangerous business and ultimately ushering in its overthrow. Black slaves in the US often disrupted the machinery of slavery through individual acts of resistance including self-mutilation, suicide, undetected abortions, poisoning of masters, and arson.

As the years of bondage accumulated, slaves taught themselves to build indigenous organizations, often disguising them beneath various camouflages such as trees in the forest. Especially important was the emergence of the black church, at first largely invisible to the uninitiated eye. Over time, the church became a brick and mortar institution, but even in this changed form it continued to present different guises to the master and slave congregants. Organized collective resistance emerged from the church and other forms of slave organization. This resistance manifested through work slowdowns, an intricate Underground Railroad through which slaves escaped to freedom, and organized slave revolts that challenged the foundation of the vicious regime. Aptheker, commenting on the significance of the slave revolt, said “Rebellion and conspiracy to rebel reflect the highest form of protest [...] [and they also reflect] deep and widespread unrest: the insurrection or the plot was, as it were, the flash of lightning that told of the profounder atmospheric disturbance creating it” (Aptheker, 1974 apud Morris, 1993, p. 34). Black slave revolts continued to rock the white supremacist regime, creating instability and the ultimate day of reckoning when slaves would attack chattel slavery head-on.

In his classic book, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois explained how black

slaves freed themselves in the context of the U.S. Civil War which was fought between the northern states (“the Union”) that feared domination by the stronger southern slave-fueled economy and the southern pro-slavery states (“the Confederacy”). Slaves succeeded in disrupting the southern economy through massive strikes, joining the war effort and providing crucial support services, and fighting as soldiers willing to shed their blood for freedom. Du Bois demonstrated that the Confederacy likely would have won the War were it not for fierce slave insurrections and the damage they caused to the south. Throughout seemingly endless years of bondage, slave protests weakened the peculiar institution, finally leading to its complete collapse. They proved Frederick Douglass correct: “He who would be free must himself strike the first blow” (Douglass, 1863).

But even after manumission, self-determination proved elusive as the severe racial constructions of the Jim Crow era replaced slavery, dashing ex-slaves’ freedom dreams. As Du Bois argued, the Jim Crow regime was slavery under a new name. In the brief period of post-Civil War Reconstruction (1863 to 1877), masses of ex-slaves were left defenseless, with neither weapons, land, wealth, income nor shelter. After the war, the national government withdrew those military forces protecting slaves leaving the defeated southern white aristocracy free to recapture ex-slaves and force them to labor in new forms of extreme economic, political, and social exploitation (Morris, 1984). Jim Crow enabled southern white capitalists to drag blacks back to plantations, forcing them to labor at levels of compensation designed to generate barely subsistence wages in an economic system of peonage debt. As sharecroppers, the former slaves remained indebted to former masters, trapped by accounting systems that ensured they never had money sufficient to become economically independent nor to provide adequate food or shelter for their families. Under Jim Crow, white elites thrived, and the white working

classes continued to serve as racial intermediaries earning a wage slightly above that of blacks. These racial disparities in wages and a racial premium in privilege proved enough to discourage white workers from uniting with black workers as a class (Du Bois, 1935). Jim Crow proved to be a tripartite system of domination (Morris, 1984) as it controlled blacks politically, socially, and economically. During nine decades of Jim Crow, southern blacks had no political rights whites were required to respect. Black disenfranchisement meant that they could neither serve on juries nor elect members of the political class. Without political rights, black people could not protect their interests. Further, they were politically and socially restricted by constant threats of terror, including lynching.

The social domination blacks experienced under Jim Crow was personal and demeaning. The system called for strict legal segregation between blacks and whites. Analyzing this personal form of domination, Morris (1999, p. 518) concluded:

The Jim Crow system went to great lengths to impress on Blacks that they were a subordinate population by forcing them to live in a separate inferior society [...] Blacks had to use separate toilets, attend separate schools, sit at the back of buses and trains, address whites with respect while being addressed disrespectfully, be sworn in on different bibles in the court room, purchase clothes without first trying them on, pass by 'white only' lunch counter seats after purchasing food, and travel without sleep because hotels would not accommodate them.

Economically, "white" and "black" jobs segregated occupations and pay. Black occupations were the dirtiest, most dangerous, and unprotected by labor unions because they discriminated against blacks, and black jobs paid the least. When Du Bois examined the economic plight of blacks under Jim Crow, he concluded, "to be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 6).

Thus, formal Jim Crow, which lasted for

nine decades, was a brutal system of racial domination buttressed by law, violence and customs. Because of it, by mid-twentieth century, the masses of black people in the United States were poor, landless, poorly educated and battled intimidation produced by violence. Yet, just as they did under slavery, blacks in the US resisted the Jim Crow regime from the outset. Resistance against the American Jim Crow regime began in the late nineteenth century and persisted during the twentieth century. Boycotts, legal cases, marches and other forms of resistance including the proliferation of protest organizations advanced the attack against racial segregation and racial inequality.

Evidence from the long history of black protest predating from the inception of blackness onward to and through the modern civil rights movement caused Morris (1984) to conclude that the black community is the home of a long-sustained protest tradition. Out of this tradition, major protest organizations have emerged including the Niagara Movement in 1905, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, Garvey's United Improvement Association in 1914, and the March on Washington Movement in 1941. By mid-century, numerous small-scale victories had chipped away at the foundations of Jim Crow. Nevertheless, for Jim Crow to fall, a large disruptive mass movement would be required. When in the 1950s they would confront it head-on, it too, would come tumbling down.

A system of domination is able to persevere because it monopolizes power while rendering the dominated powerless. By mid-1950s, Jim Crow segregation stood as the supreme social order across the south keeping blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, major challenges to Jim Crow were becoming visible. The United States Supreme Court ruled in May 1954 that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional – this gave boundless hope to black people that racial segregation was on its deathbed. Nevertheless, in August of the following year fourteen-year-old

Emmett Till was lynched in Money, Mississippi. The brutality of the murder, the bravery of Till's mother (who left his casket open so that all could see the horrors her son suffered), and acquittals of two white men who were obviously guilty of the racist crime, all galvanized the black community. But a key turning point was on December 1, 1955 the bus boycott was launched in Montgomery, Alabama following the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. The modern civil rights movement had begun.

By the 1950s, the black community had undergone considerable urbanization as African Americans left the southern US for northern cities, and urban institutions, especially the church, were soon far stronger and more capable of mobilizing and supporting a mass-based movement against Jim Crow (Morris, 1984). The Montgomery bus boycott was based in these black community institutions and organizations, and soon developed into a mass movement. Championed by its charismatic leader Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement chose the method of nonviolent direct action as its main tactic to slay Jim Crow. Also new to the movement was its mass mobilization. In times preceding the Montgomery action, antiracist struggles tended to be initiated by individuals or litigated by a few litigants and lawyers in the courts. The bus boycott deviated sharply from these efforts: it involved black masses directly in organized activity designed to disrupt the racial status quo. Rev. James Lawson, a major strategist of the movement, explained the difference mass nonviolent direct action made:

Many people, when they are suffering and they see their people suffering, they want direct participation. So you put into the hands of all kinds of ordinary people a positive alternative to powerlessness and frustration. That's one of the great things about direct action (Lawson, 1978 apud Morris, 1984, p. 124).

Martin Luther King, concurring with Lawson, explained how the power of disruption was used to achieve change when he

wrote, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue" (King JR., 1963, p. 1).

Thus, did the bus boycott change the entire logic of antiracist struggle, and the success of that action was proven with the overthrow of segregation on busses in Montgomery. Building on that victory, major forms of nonviolent direct action came to include other boycotts, mass marches, sit-ins, mass arrests, mass demonstrations and other techniques deliberately designed to disrupt the Jim Crow order. Nonviolent direct action shifted the power differential between dominators and the dominated because of its capacity to simply and effectively disrupt social order. Systems of domination endure because they monopolize power for those in high ranked positions and impose a lack of power on the dominated. Social movements are able to generate power to achieve change via disruption; a community makes a pact to explicitly refuse to allow business as usual. Civil Rights movement participants perfected their effective use of nonviolent direct action across southern cities and rural locales throughout the mid-1950s and '60s. When massive disruptions forced the federal government to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Bill banning all forms of racial segregation, a great victory against Jim Crow was finally achieved. Additional mass disruptions in 1965 spurred the federal government to pass the Voting Rights Bill, which enfranchised southern blacks and removed another crucial pillar of Jim Crow, the barring of black people from political participation.

While the gains made had been notable, by 1955 it was becoming clear that removing Jim Crow barriers would not erase the effects of centuries of economic and social oppression that crippled black people and their economies and communities. Direct intervention in the form of affirmative action was needed to address the deprivation, and in 1965 US President Johnson endorsed affirmative action to address the black predicament, stating:

But freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others', and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus, it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates (Johnson, 1965).

In a single decade, the civil rights movement had overthrown formal Jim Crow and opened the possibility that the implementation of tangible measures would be required to equalize the quality of life among the races. Indeed, the fall of Jim Crow surely signaled prospects of new possibilities, including the election of Barack Obama as America's first black president four decades.

As is clear from the preceding section describing gaping differences between the lives of nonwhites and whites, the USA still suffers from important dimensions of racism that remain untouched despite movement successes. Europeans and Euro-descended whites had successfully branded Africans Americans an inferior race when they began racial slavery in North America, and the brand has endured. This label proved useful in justifying centuries of oppression against black men and women in a land claiming to uphold democracy and freedom as ideals (Morris, 2015). Indeed, racial domination prevailed, as did the profligation of an ideology of black inferiority. Confronting this issue, Martin Luther King commented, "Black people have been kept in oppression and deprivation by a poisonous fog of lies [...] The twisted logic ran, if the black man was inferior he was not oppressed – his place in society was appropriate to his meager talent and intellect" (King JR., 1968, p. 1).

A pernicious outcome of the black inferiority thesis was the internalization of this lie by many black people in the USA. It was difficult, indeed, for blacks to escape its inter-

nalization given its infusion throughout North American institutions including the media, labor market, schools and universities, and beauty pageants, that each promoted white supremacists visions of how the USA should operate. But a new movement – The Black Power Movement – arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s to eradicate the black inferiority thesis and to seek power rather than mere racial integration. The Black Power movement advocated a new way of looking at blackness: "Black is Beautiful." To be sure, this theme was prevalent in scholarship of earlier black scholars including Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, and historian Carter G. Woodson. It was also a central trope in the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s. Similarly, the Garvey Movement of the 1920s contributed to this empowering perspective by championing black pride. The Black Power movement popularized this view among the masses by fighting for Black Studies, especially in college and universities that explored noble heritages of Black folk throughout the Diaspora.

The Black Power movement advocated for community control of the police and economic empowerment as part of their struggle to gain real power and bring it into black communities. In this, and in other ways, the Black Power movement differed from preceding movements. Specifically, in significant contrast to the nonviolent civil rights movement, the Black Power movement insisted on the right of self-defense. During this period, a number of urban rebellions (negatively labeled by whites as "riots") erupted, usually in response to police brutality against unarmed victims. The assassination of movement leaders including Malcolm X, King, and much of the leadership of the Black Panther Party also served to galvanize black protest. Further, The Black Power movement revealed the startling magnitude of racial disparities in the north: formal Jim Crow may not have afflicted it, but *de facto* racial segregation and oppression were widespread in northern cities. Like the

southern nonviolent movement, the Black Power movement extracted concessions from the government although they were more difficult to trace directly to the movement.

In twenty-first century America, slavery and legal Jim Crow oppression are strictly prohibited by law. In fact, overt racial discrimination is largely considered politically incorrect, even in the current era where right wing bigotry is given greater license because of the approvals both tacit and explicit given to racists by the 45th President of the United States. Most whites in the US believe racism is a relic of an unfortunate past and think that to be labeled a “white racist” is an unspeakably and inaccurate and horrible identification. Even in the kinder, gentler, racial environment of the Obama years we saw blacks continue to lag far behind whites in securing good chances for a high quality of life. Stated differently, institutionalized racial inequality is prevalent in the US, and perhaps it is even obvious – yet in the US it is not easy to speak about racism openly. Racial inequality, animus, and violence is widespread, but talking about it is not tolerated. It seems intolerable to a vocal proportion of the polity for someone to kneel in silence while the national anthem is being played before sporting events to bring attention to the government’s own silence about the too-frequent murders of unarmed black people at the hands of police officers (Branch, 2017); it apparently does not matter that the face of that movement was named one of *Time Magazine’s* 2017 Persons of the Year (Gregory, 2017). Contradictions between blatant racist acts and larger society’s silence about racial injustice challenge scholars to come to grips with what appears to be a new regime of race oppression. Scholars float various names for the phenomenon, including “symbolic racism” (Kinder; Sears, 1981), “laissez faire racism” (Bobo; Kluegel; Smith, 1996), “colorblind racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and the “new Jim Crow” (Alexander, 2010). All of these approaches agree that racism remains a stark reality in contemporary America that is

present in the wider public discourse only in more surreptitious forms.

Concentrated poverty in black inner-city neighborhoods resembling internal colonies remains a troubling and persistent problem. In these settings, black and brown residents experience high unemployment, inferior schools, high levels of crime, intense violence and extremely high levels of incarceration. In these respects, poor inner cities in the USA resemble favelas in South America and other locales across the globe where the poor are concentrated. The daunting problem is that there are no obvious solutions in sight that could readily transform these wretched inner cities of color in America. From the point of view of the powerful, these slums are “out of sight” and “out of mind”, requiring no attention or infusion of transformative resources. Yes, black middle and upper classes fare better in contemporary America enjoying stable occupations and superior resources. Yet even these relatively well-off people of color experience racism on a daily basis and lag far behind their white counterparts especially regarding wealth because they are unable to transmit resources across generations giving the lack of inheritances generated by the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Today, violent encounters with police stemming from racial profiling occur during normal daily activities “while black” stand out as prodigious race problems yet to be solved in 21st century North America. To protect the interests of dominant groups, surveillance and policing of the poor and oppressed are high priorities. Criminal activities based in a violent underground economy compensates for the lack of viable employment, but also seems to justify (in the minds of dominant whites) unusually high rates of police surveillance in black and brown communities where people of color experience racial profiling, and incessant “stop-and-frisk” detainment. These practices often undertaken by white police officers create hostile and even violent interactions be-

tween social control agents and people of color. Further, they lead to mass arrests, injuries and even deaths. High profile killings of young black men, and increasingly black women, have become barometers through which to measure the racial climate (Crenshaw, 1989). Irrespective of evidence, rare are the convictions for police officers who maim or kill black and brown people. Each acquittal causes outrage because they reveal the unfairness and race biases inherent in the criminal justice system and society writ large (Van Cleve, 2016).

New social movements including Dream Defenders, Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName were organized to confront the modern regime of American racism by naming victims and perpetrators, sharing the news of anti-black violence and racial inequality, and educating the public so we all take notice. These movements were developed to respond to highly visible murders of young black people at the hands of the police who were set free by the courts despite what appeared to be ample evidence that should have led to convictions. The murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland and dozens of other young black people directly led to the formation of these new movements. These differ substantially from previous movements during slavery and Jim Crow. In the current movements, women's leadership is central, a characteristic not usually found in past movements that were led by figures epitomized by King and Malcolm X. These new movements also embrace gay and queer leadership in contrast to previous movements that had strongly homophobic elements or that feared gay leadership would delegitimize the struggle. New anti-racist movements also choose decentralization of leadership over bureaucratization and formal processes of decision-making; they resist top-down strategizing and greatly utilize social media in mobilizing and organizing movement strategies (Fleming; Morris, 2015). Finally, new antiracist movements tend to have limited goals, seeking for example to end police violence and mass incarceration.

The verdict is out on whether these new movements are likely to succeed. They face daunting challenges including whether they will be able to sustain themselves given their loose organizational structures and informal decision-making practices. The racial situation in the US strains even faculty and activists of color who strain to educate about race and racism in predominately white higher education institutions in the US – they face greater rates of burnout and “racial battle fatigue” because of the high-stake nature of the work and their sense of urgency about the state of racial injustice (Gorski, 2018). Perhaps the greatest challenge facing contemporary activists both inside and outside of the academy is the extent to which anti-racist movements, largely organized through social media, can develop across the black community and among allied and accomplice communities the solidarity and trust necessary to propel high-risk activism. It is left to each generation of activists to face new demands and challenges that must be addressed sufficiently enough to generate social change. Only time will tell us whether this new generation of young black activists and their supporters will topple yet another regime of American racism. If the past is prologue, American racism will continue to face vigorous resistance with each victory leading to a more perfect union.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have provided an overview and analysis of the state of racial affairs in the United States of America. While those in the US academy tend to stand on the idea that race is a social construction, we have shown that many Americans, especially people of color, live with the realities of racial inequality. Black, Latino/a, and Asian people live lives unequal to those of whites, who themselves believe that the nonwhite gain only at the loss of whites. These whites oppose affirmative ac-

tion arguing that it promotes “reverse discrimination.” The irony is that affirmative action has disproportionately benefited white Americans, especially white women (Crenshaw, 2006). But, as we have shown, it is nonwhites who suffer from the racial dynamics that permeate American core institutions-economy, polity, family, criminal justice system, culture and social interactions-producing huge social inequalities and human suffering.

In the USA, racial disparities in income, wealth, neighborhoods, education, poverty, incarceration, health and life expectancy are glaring. As we examined the data, it compelled us to conclude that the reality of unequal races, rooted in racial enslavement, still permeates North American society. Even still, many contemporary whites, especially those in elite positions, vehemently deny racism exists in modern America because, in their view, the society has become colorblind just like Martin Luther King desired. People of color on the other hand, continue to suffer economically, experience purging from voter registration rolls and denial of access to voting booths, die in the streets at the hands of the police and from their own people, and find themselves trapped in poverty and despair. The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency has encouraged racist whites to emerge from every nook and corner of society to resist any measures to initiate racial change. Indeed, white racial violence and bigotry are now committed openly to extent not seen in the recent past. Because the current system of racial oppression in America is having such deleterious effects on people of color, one scholar, fully aware of the oppressive effects of slavery and Jim Crow, has described it as producing a new nadir in US race relations (Cha-Jua, Sundiata, forthcoming).

But racially oppressive systems are neither natural nor inevitable. Resistance to racism occurred throughout racial slavery, Jim Crow, and the contemporary period where oppression is less formal but formidable nonetheless. Racial subalterns can and have collectively resisted

and deconstructed racism, and will continue to do so. Their lived experiences tell the truth about racial inequalities, and they organize to discover the resources, energy, and knowledge needed to successfully resist and dismantle oppression. With resources, organization and insight, collective antiracist action is possible. The historic black freedom struggle successfully overthrew slavery and Jim Crow. In so doing, it has inspired worldwide movements for people seeking to realize their freedom dreams. The black struggle continues to challenge people in America to fight for freedom in one of the nation’s darkest periods. Let us hope that Dr. King (“Our God is marching on” march 25, 1965) was right: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”.

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**O ESTADO RACIAL DA UNIÃO: compreendendo
raça e desigualdade racial nos Estados Unidos da
América**

Aldon Morris
Vilna Bashi Treitler

Este artigo investiga o papel da raça e do racismo nos Estados Unidos da América. Ele trata de raça como conceito, explorando, primordialmente, o motivo da existência de categorias raciais e da desigualdade racial. Também, nele, examinamos a atual situação da raça nos Estados Unidos ao expor suas manifestações sociais, econômicas e políticas. Após explorar a magnitude da desigualdade racial nos Estados Unidos, trabalhamos para desvendar os mecanismos que perpetuam e sustentam, tanto estrutural quanto culturalmente, as disparidades raciais. Em razão de ações e crenças racistas terem sempre sofrido resistências por parte dos movimentos sociais, atos coletivos, e resistência individual, nós analisamos a natureza e os resultados dos esforços da luta contra o racismo norte-americano. Concluímos com uma análise das perspectivas atuais relativas à transformação racial e das possibilidades para a emergência da igualdade racial. Assim, neste artigo, trazemos uma análise abrangente da situação atual das dinâmicas raciais nos Estados Unidos e das forças determinadas a combater o racismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Raça. Racismo. Regimes raciais. Movimentos negros. Desigualdade.

**ÉTAT RACIAL DE L'UNION: comprendre la race et
les inégalités raciales aux États-Unis d'Amérique**

Aldon Morris
Vilna Bashi Treitler

Notre article évaluera le rôle de la race et du racisme en Amérique. Le document aborde conceptuellement la race en explorant pourquoi les catégories raciales et l'inégalité raciale existent en premier lieu. Le document passe à l'examen de l'état actuel de la race en Amérique en mettant à nu les manifestations sociales, économiques et politiques. Étant donné l'ampleur de l'inégalité raciale aux États-Unis, le document cherche à démêler les mécanismes à la fois structurels et culturels qui perpétuent et maintiennent les disparités raciales. Parce que le mouvement raciste a toujours été combattu en Amérique par des mouvements sociaux, des actions de collecte et de résistance au niveau personnel, le journal évaluera la nature et les résultats des luttes pour renverser le racisme américain. Ainsi, l'article fournira une analyse de l'état actuel de la dynamique raciale aux États-Unis ainsi que des forces déterminées à démanteler le racisme.

MOTS-CLÉS: Race. Racisme. Régimen racial. Mouvement nègre. Inégalité.

Aldon D. Morris – Doutor em Sociologia pela State University of New York, Stony Brook. Professor do Departamento de Sociologia e diretor do African American Studies da Northwestern University. Pesquisa raça, movimentos sociais; sociologia e política de W.E.B. Du Bois. Ganhou vários prêmios por sua atuação acadêmica e ensino. Em 2017 teve um filme feito sobre sua vida e trabalho – “The Scholar Affirmed”. Suas mais recentes publicações são: *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Dubois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. Seu livro, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black community organizing for change*, é uma das principais pesquisas sobre o Movimento dos Direitos Civis nos EUA. Tem várias publicações sobre raça, teoria social, movimentos sociais.

Vilna Bashi Treitler – Doutora em Sociologia pela Universidade de Wisconsin-Madison. Professora do Departamento de Sociologia da Universidade da Califórnia, Santa Barbara. Diretora do Centro de Estudos Afro-Americanos da Universidade da Califórnia, SB. Desenvolve pesquisas sobre desigualdades raciais, racismo, globalização e estratificação. Suas mais recentes publicações são: *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Factions* e *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World*. Organizou um dossiê para *Current Sociology* intitulado *Dynamics of Inequality in a Global Perspective*, além de inúmeros artigos.

