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A THEORY OF IMMIGRATION AND RACIAL STRATIFICATION

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When immigration is the subject, both academic literature and public discourse tend to assume that hardworking and persevering immigrants will earn entrée into the labor market and society at large. It is also assumed that those who try will be rewarded with successful integration into the larger community of citizens. This basic assumption is the basis of the assimilation model (McDaniel, 1995). It is an assumption that is often used when considering the relative successes of various groups in American society; therefore, it is worth examining. The classic model of assimilation assumes that immigrants arrive with a relative disadvantage vis-à-vis European Americans and that they are culturally distant and distinct. The immigrant group is assumed to have the potential to be like the native-born or majority group. The passage of time brings increasing education and economic opportunities that facilitate the withering of ethnic differences, and socioeconomic advancement translates into social mobility and integration. The idea of an American “melting pot” is a characterization of the classic model of assimilation.

The model was applied in a famed study of the problems of African Americans—Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* (1962). In that book, Myrdal explains that America’s problem is one of

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racial inassimilability—a characterization he suggests would be corrected when those who are systematically marginalized by society finally gain access. Myrdal ponders the question of why certain groups are unable to assimilate as European ethnic groups have successfully done over time, but he errs on two counts as he attempts to answer. Both of his errors are common and extend from his reliance on the assimilation model. He first confounds the problem of race with that of ethnicity—all persons arrive on this land with an ethnic identity but acquire (and often involuntarily so) a racial tag. It is the racial label that delimits the extent of one's assimilability in American society (McDaniel, 1995). Myrdal's second error is also common: With the assimilation model as his premise, he must choose a baseline social type to which individuals and communities must conform. Myrdal suggests that *European American* behavior patterns should be emulated in order for one to assimilate into *American* society.

As other researchers have done since, Myrdal focused on the structural causes of racial differences and assumes that behavioral differences are in part to blame (Lieberson, 1980; Wilson, 1978). These researchers assume that the problems African Americans face are due to their inability to emulate the behavior of their "fellow citizens." The barriers to African American emulation of European behavior are seen as structural, that is, racial segregation in schooling and housing and a lack of economic opportunities prevent full socioeconomic incorporation. It is thought that by removing the barriers to African American participation in society as a whole, local social institutions could foster a change in African American behavior. This idea stems from the belief that a similar process succeeded in the case of the ethnic European immigrant experience. One of the many problems with this belief stems from the confounding of race with ethnicity.

Racial systems are ways of classifying people, usually by judging how closely their phenotype fits with the somatic norm images of what the different races "look" like. Races derive from these classification systems. Racial classification has implications for a person's life chances because racial stratification is a social hierarchy. In the United States, having African-like features and dark skin

color places one within the lower levels of the racial hierarchy (Keith & Herring, 1991; McDaniel, 1995; Telles & Murguia, 1990). Ethnicity, on the other hand, emerges from cultural identification. Ethnic groups are those who share cultural traits such as similar foods, ways of dress, language, and so forth, and see themselves as distinct from other groups (Smedley, 1993, p. 29). Race and ethnicity are often confounded, both in the popular and in the academic literature, making it all the harder to understand race and racism in the United States. However, it is important to recognize some of the crucial differences between race and ethnicity. Race has meaning only in the context of a racial hierarchy.

Racial systems must have mechanisms for determining who is in which race, for that determines where people, families, and other groups fit into the racial hierarchy. In the United States, immigration has played an important role in shaping that hierarchy. Immigrants enter the United States and are assimilated into the dominant social organization, and this process includes assimilation into the system of racial stratification (Cox, 1948, p. 47). We will focus on this latter aspect of the immigrant experience. First, we briefly outline the origins of the U.S. racial system. Second, we suggest ways to broaden the literature that studies race, and, finally, we present a model for studying the relationship between immigration and racial stratification.

ORIGINS OF THE SYSTEM OF RACIAL STRATIFICATION

The biological existence of race is an ideologically loaded concept with dubious scientific merit (King, 1981). In fact, there is much evidence to contradict the biological conception of race and to suggest that race is a social construct that is far from universally understood and applied. Yet the assumption of a biological basis for race is still widely used in academic and popular literature (see Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Sowell, 1994). For example, the widely read authors of *The Bell Curve* use race to study genetic differences in intelligence in the population (Herrnstein & Murray,

1994). The publication and the debate surrounding this book show that the literature demystifying race has not been clearly absorbed, much less understood and applied.¹

There is not in existence, nor has there ever been, a society or scientific community that made its racial classifications on the basis of genetic examinations of the population. Such a scheme is doomed to failure given that genetic variability is greater within populations than between them. What constitutes a race and how one recognizes a racial difference is culturally determined. Whether two individuals are regarded as of the same race depends on their history, traditions, and personal experiences, not their genetic material. The process of identifying individuals is a function of this culture of difference. In the context of the United States, immigration has played an important and essential role in racial identification.

The creation and development of the idea of race and racial ideology in North America has its roots in the European enslavement of African peoples (Drake, 1990; Smedley, 1993). The very idea of race assumes a hierarchy of racial groups. Within this hierarchy, Africans were on the bottom and Europeans on the top. "The system was justified by the deeply felt, and sometimes theologically sanctioned, belief that black people were born to serve white people" (Drake, 1987, p. 290). The slave was expected to differ in physical type from the slave master: "No whites could ever 'fall' into a state of slavery" (Drake, 1987, p. 290). The African was the "ideal type of savage" and the European was the "Father of civilization." The African became the "ideal-typical" other. The physical difference between Africans and Europeans was used as the defining criteria of otherness. Removing one's otherness requires replacing one's race, an impossibility in most cases, but it constitutes a desire that has negative consequences for populations such as the African American population.

Racial identification is a symbol of social status, and an important factor in the maintenance of group differentiation. The work of Kenneth Clark was one of the first studies to empirically demonstrate the importance of this idea, and his work has been substantiated by more recent research (Clark & Clark, 1939, 1940; Hoe-

tink, 1962; Powell-Hopson & Hopson, 1988; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1971). Racial identification is believed to affect all racial groups within society in a similar fashion with different implications. For example, the European American racial identification with "Whiteness" is a confirmation of positive self-esteem among Americans of European origin; however, for African Americans this same cultural preference is a confirmation of their negative status within the society.

RACE AND IMMIGRATION

Immigration played an important role in the development of the U.S. racial system. In the early history of the United States, the citizenry was composed mainly of Western and Northern Europeans. As others—particularly groups from Southern and Central European countries—began to arrive in greater and greater numbers, it was feared that they were bringing with them undesirable traits. (With the exception of the Irish, Northern and Western Europeans were deemed the only desirable immigrants well beyond the first quarter of the twentieth century).

"Black," "Hispanic," and "Asian" immigrants are assigned to races within the European model of racial hierarchy, which may be quite different from the racial systems in their homelands (McDaniel, 1995). Categories such as Hispanic and Asian are constructed to group together peoples not necessarily similar (e.g., East Indians and Koreans). These concerns are emphasized by Peterson who questions the validity of demographic research that counts and analyzes various aspects of ethnic group membership (Peterson, 1987, p. 187). If the ability to know a person's ethnicity is in question, certainly the European model of racial hierarchy—which tends to construct races as a grouping of peoples of various ethnicities—is problematic. Immigrants do not come to America racially classified in the American sense (Alba, 1990; McDaniel, 1995). Immigrants are forced to assimilate as members of different racial groups because of racial stratification. Thus immigrants from Europe will typically be assimilated into "White" America, while

immigrants from elsewhere will be fit into various categories of "otherness." In the United States racial assimilation of immigrants of various national origins is central to the construction of the racial hierarchy.

THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL STRATIFICATION

William J. Wilson's (1978) *Declining Significance of Race* suggests that racial stratification has historically interacted with social structure. According to this reading of events, it is under slavery and in the period immediately following manumission that race was the determining factor. However, industrial development and structural economic change has enabled, first, a stratification of African Americans by class, and second, the creation of an underclass of people who are disaffected and disconnected from the fruits of society at large. Further, this underclass is seen as a class, not a race-based position. Although we agree with Wilson's appreciation of the importance of class in analyzing racial stratification, we would like to suggest a reexamination of the role of racial exclusion and marginalization in contemporary American society. We present this evidence that racism has a persistent impact on the life chances of the so-called minority population.

First, the American slave experience involved both a class and race position. However, the state of being a slave has always been a class position, not a race position. It was only after slavery was instituted in the Americas that it emerged here in its racialized form (Drake, 1990, chap. 7). The system of racial stratification practiced in the United States is a product of the European attempt to justify slavery of a people imported to produce under duress in the fast-growing, cash-crop-based economy of the United States. The majority of Africans arrived in this country enslaved; however, not all remained enslaved.² Thus, from a technical point of view, enslavement was a class position, which, however, became racialized in the Americas. The racialization of slavery transformed the class

position of the slave into a race-class position. It was then that the African population became viewed as both a class and a race.

Second, although we agree that recent structural change has altered the opportunities open to African Americans in society, it does not follow that race plays a diminishing role in determining those opportunities. Racial conflict is played out on a sociopolitical field with the issues of greatest concern being those of racial control of residential areas, public facilities like schools and recreation areas, and municipal political systems. Such struggles center on issues that very much determine the life chances of the average African American in the United States, and these issues are clearly about racial control of resources that shape one's life in crucial ways. It has always been the case that both race and class conjoin to shape opportunities and rewards for African Americans, just as race and class systems shape life chances for their European counterparts.

There is a way to study racial difference that will reveal insights about how racial stratification operates and affects those who live under that stratification system. But certainly, if the members of society are studied as if their race is an individual characteristic that *explains* individual outcomes, those insights will not be revealed. The problem is that one looks at race and racism, and even slavery, as if it creates internalized characteristics within its victims, rather than looking at these as institutions that have lasting consequences on the *social relations* between the institutional participants. Race is not an inherent set of psychobiological characteristics, and neither is it a classification that affects only non-Whites. The racial hierarchy structures opportunities for Whites as well as for non-Whites—Whites end up on top and Blacks on the bottom. Note the historical example of the later-arriving European immigrant groups, who were considered undesirable for entry into the larger "White" population, but were soon assimilated as they were made White themselves (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990).

The assimilation model assumes that the immigrant group will become like the majority population as the passage of time brings a withering of ethnic differences and socioeconomic advancement translates into residential mobility/assimilation. In the United States, the principal forms of social assimilation are cultural, physi-

cal, and spatial. In each of these types of assimilation, the African American has been uniquely excluded (Hacker, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1993; McDaniel, 1995). African Americans are not being assimilated culturally, residentially, or physically. African Americans are not intermarrying as often as other groups, and residential segregation is increasing. The passage of time may bring a withering of ethnic differences for European-origin immigrants, and racial differences among these European-origin populations is not an important issue (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990). However, for immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, race continues to be a salient issue of American life.

AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR U.S.-BORN DESCENDANTS

The legacy of enslavement permeates all social, political, and economic relationships between African descendants and European descendants. Racism derives from a system of racial slavery, but it applies to all "Blacks," slave descendants or not; race was constructed as a sociobiological type from which only those who can "pass" escape its most negative connotations.³ Thus the African American population is often viewed as a classless group of formerly enslaved individuals. Differences within the African American population, however, have always existed. There were class differences within the African American population during enslavement, and indeed class differences existed following enslavement. The modern period has witnessed the further crystallization of these class differences among African Americans (Butler, 1991; DuBois, 1935/1992; Horton, 1993). However, the power of the monolithic view of the "Black race" persists.

Classified as "Black," Caribbean and African immigrants are forced to contend with a socioeconomic system that sees a monolithic "culture" and "race" within the African American population. Initially, the ethnic difference of the African and Caribbean immigrant group may distinguish them from the general African American population. The passage of time (within one or two genera-

tions), however, brings a withering of ethnic differences, which results in their or their descendants becoming African Americans. This system imposes a racial identity in accordance to the racial stratification system as it operates in the United States. New arrivals may not know their race when they arrive, but they certainly learn it eventually.⁴

The immigrant's response to racism depends on where in the racial hierarchy of the country of origin the immigrant was placed—that is, how one perceives oneself in both societies. Thus one may try (a) to pass, (b) to distinguish oneself from the group known as African Americans, or (c) to decide to bear as best one can the racist treatment in exchange for access to economic and educational opportunities better than one would face in one's home country (Bryce-Laporte, 1972; Stafford, 1987).

Race has a hierarchical character that permeates the lives of the native born and immigrants alike. Of course, the influence it has on the lives of those considered Black—who remain at the bottom of the racial hierarchy—is nearly exclusively negative. It is interesting to note, on the contrary, instances in popular and academic discourse where the West Indian experience in the United States is used as the example that shows that discrimination on the basis of race is not as important to shaping the life chances of the African descendants who live here. However, empirical evidence does not substantiate this conclusion (e.g., Jasso & Rosenzweig, 1990).

As discussed earlier, the assimilation model *expects* an immigrant family to succeed eventually, or at least in subsequent generations. Interestingly, that success is seen as an anomaly when the immigrant family is Black: Generally it is West Indian "success" that is the anomaly most widely discussed. The truth is that success of Black immigrants is not great if compared to Whites. Comparisons are oftentimes made between African Americans and West Indians where differential success is attributed to cultural differences between West Indians and African Americans. Differential success among groups racially identified as Black is wrongly taken to imply that race is not very important in shaping the African American experience in the United States.

Sowell (1978) is a well-known case in point. He suggests that West Indians are "more African" than African Americans, yet still show "a high incidence of 'success' (income, education, occupation, etc.)" and that this evidence sufficiently "undermines the explanatory power of current white discrimination as a cause of current black poverty" (Sowell, 1978, p. 49). Evidence from the 1960, 1970, and 1980 censuses, as presented by Jasso and Rosenzweig (1990) suggest exactly the opposite. They compare the real mean earnings of native-born and foreign-born Black and White immigrants to the United States for each decennial census. Their data show that (a) for each year except 1970, Black native-born persons on average earned more than foreign-born Blacks, (b) White foreign-born persons earned significantly higher than either foreign-born or native-born Blacks, (c) the gap between Black and White mean real earnings is far greater than the gap between foreign-born and native-born of either race, and (d) Black new entrants earn least, relative to both White and Black native-born persons and White new entrants (with very stark differences in 1960 and 1980). Significantly, although earnings rose for all groups between 1960 and 1970, and fell for all groups between 1970 and 1980, the racial gaps—and these are the greater gaps in earnings here—all remained throughout.

A number of comments can be made regarding Sowell's analysis, and how he comes to his conclusions. First, Sowell may have erred because he based his statements on income figures from 1970, a year that shows real mean earnings for Black immigrant males as somewhat higher than that for Black native-born males. The difference may be due to differences in the population reporting to the census that year, or, as suggested above, this year may be a historical anomaly. (Sowell's conclusions, however, definitively suggest that he believes West Indian success is a permanent historical phenomenon, not just one evident in 1970.)

Sowell also errs by comparing African Americans of different ethnicities to one another in order to talk about the effects of race. This is an error in two senses. First, race and ethnicity are neither identical nor interchangeable: One is a sociobiological phenomenon that places people in a value hierarchy; the other is a cultural

phenomenon that is shared among people who originate from the same geographic areas, and share language, customs, and/or other markers of group identity. Second, that economic privilege is accorded on the basis of race while one examines only one race is to make an error in research design. It is misleading to draw larger implications about race by merely studying differences in success among subgroups on the bottom without reference to the group on the top.

West Indians are overwhelmingly concentrated in New York City. Even if all African descendants moved to New York City, and theoretically faced the same opportunity structures, you would still find ethnic difference in economic performance among groups racially classified as Black. To know this, one needs to know a few things about immigration: (a) that it is selective—only highly motivated individuals, regardless of their means or race, make it into the United States, and they are usually inserted into cities, industries, and jobs that *center and depend on* immigrant labor (thus, not everyone will get these same labor market positions); and (b) that immigrants follow other immigrants in a “chain” and find jobs and housing through the immigrant “social network” of which they are members (Bryce-Laporte, 1972; Massey, Alarcón, Durand, & González, 1987; Sassen, 1988, 1991). In fact, the selection and social networking of Black immigrants all have to do with access to job niches *and* social support to cope with and adapt to the racial stratification they face when they arrive.

CONCLUSION

Migration studies often involve a comparison of different ethnic groups' performances in various social processes (like assimilation, acculturation, and socioeconomic attainment), but race is rarely used as a macrolevel variable to explain outcomes. If race is discussed, it is seen as an individual attribute that is used to “explain” differential outcomes among groups as “evidenced” by micromeasures such as educational attainment or labor force expe-

rience. When various ethnic groups of the same race are compared, especially when differential “successes” are evident, race is not seen as a relevant factor. Strangely, this work suggests that only if all groups of the same race show the same socioeconomic outcomes would the null hypothesis “racism and discrimination exists” be accepted.

Pluralist arguments that suggest the merits of a multiethnic society ignore the hierarchical conceptualization of the race issue: Racial classification is not value free. Importantly, the U.S. hierarchy is of a dichotomous nature, which clearly means that one group is on the bottom and another on top. Just as races are constructed, so are the characteristics—physical, moral, and otherwise—that identify the group. But it is a fact not only that racial identity gives one a value in society but also that it determines one’s life chances. Thus, for the new arrival as well as for the native-born, race plays a role in determining one’s “success” or “failure.” It is, then, tautological to study economic success by looking at variation across race if the researcher does not acknowledge that race is a macrolevel variable that *determines* socioeconomic variation among groups. Most researchers include race as an individual attribute—like residence, educational attainment, occupation, and so on—that can be controlled for while comparing groups in a study of socioeconomic difference.

In sum, we argue that racial stratification is a very important factor in shaping the lives of all persons deemed Black in the United States, and immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are not exempt. Much earlier work on African Americans and immigrants of African descent has failed to see this because it has erred by not understanding several crucial facts about race and ethnicity in the United States: (a) that racial stratification is a dichotomous hierarchy, and to properly study it, one must look at the social relations between and socioeconomic outcomes for both the group that comes out on top and the one that is on the bottom; (b) that race and ethnicity are neither identical nor interchangeable; and (c) that immigrants lose their ethnic identifiers as they are reconstructed into races; therefore, racial assimilation of immigrants of various

ethnic groups is central to the construction of the racial hierarchy in the United States.

NOTES

1. The literature that describes the social construction of race is extensive. For example, King's (1981) *The Biology of Race* is a good source that suggests that a biological foundation for distinct racial categories is seriously questionable. Two other books suggest the idea of race is one that was constructed, has historical origins of a political and economic nature, and was invented and continually transformed and exported by Europeans. Omi and Winant's (1994) *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* and St. Clair Drake's (1990) *Black Folk Here and There* explain that there are different types of racism, all of which have historical roots in the social systems where they were found.

2. Sowell (1978) writes that "legally free Negroes averaged between 10 and 14 percent of the Black population from 1800 to 1860, and they appeared almost as far back as slavery itself." Furthermore, Africans first came to the United States as other than slaves: "In the earliest days of African bondage in colonial America—in the first half of the seventeenth century—Black bondsmen progressed through the same stages as White indentured servants, emerging as free men after a fixed number of years" (Sowell, 1978, p. 9). Both White and Black men served as indentured servants when the first Black indentured servants arrived in Jamestown in 1619. Chattel slavery only developed in the latter half of the century. It was later, too, that racial slavery was instituted.

3. In this regard, Bryce-Laporte (1972) refers to one particular study of "passing" immigrants:

Most immigrants, black and white, are aware even though not personally acquainted with, the severity and blatancy of the race problem in this country relative to their own. Hence, as Mills et al. (1950) suggested, it was for this reason that many mixed-blood and marginal Puerto Rican blacks hesitated to have settled in this country and that many of the other Puerto Ricans who did settle may have tried to pass as nonblacks or even non-Puerto Ricans whenever possible. (p. 42)

See C. W. Mills et al., *Puerto Rican Journey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

4. For examples of how Haitian and Puerto Rican immigrants learn to understand their race, see Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman (1992) and Stafford (1987).

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