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The Abandoned Promise of Civil Rights

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Abstract

Fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement, ethnic and racial disparities persist and have even widened across a number of socioeconomic indicators. When compared against whites, non-whites today fare about the same or worse than their counterparts of the past in educational and occupational attainment, income and earnings, wealth, unemployment and underemployment. How can we understand the failure of racial and ethnic minority groups to attain socioeconomic parity with non-Hispanic whites following one of the most progressive eras of American race relations? Contemporary economic and political approaches are often considered separately and offer different explanations. What they share in common, however, is a tendency to downplay the salience of race as a significant factor that conditions the life chances of non-whites in the post-civil rights era. This article introduces a critical race perspective to redirect this conversation. This approach starts from the premise that the social structure of the United States is highly stratified by race, which conditions racially unequal outcomes. In the post-civil rights era, colorblind racism is the hegemonic ideology, discourse, and practice, which justifies persistent racial inequality. The development of a colorblind ideology reflects this historical moment, and the larger political and economic context; thus, its development is consistent with the political shift towards neoconservatism and the economic transition to neoliberalism. Taken together, these social forces foster the reproduction of a racialized social system characterized by persistent racial inequality that is observed in the post-civil rights era.

Introduction

Historically, racism, or ideologies of white racial dominance in the United States, justified non-white racial exploitation and secured “red land and black labor,” which contributed to and safeguarded the wealth and position of white Americans (Mills 2003:43). Scientific racism, or the racial project that asserted the inherent biological superiority of whites and the inherent biological inferiority of blacks and other non-whites (Steinberg 2007), provided the rational and “objective” criteria necessary to continue white racial supremacy throughout the pre-industrial and industrial eras (Wilson 1978). Following World War II, a changing economy, polity, and civil society, coalesced against the dogma of essential racial difference, ushering in a new conception of race. What was once understood to be fixed, primordial, and rooted in biology was now understood as fluid, ancillary, and embedded in notions of shared culture and history (Omi and Winant 1994). Thus the meaning of race was redefined from a distinctly biological or genetic classification to a cultural or ethnic one. This process, the way in which the meaning of race can change over time, is illustrative of the idea that race is a social construct, or the product of a dynamic historical and social context, albeit one that remains stubbornly associated with physical traits and features.

The paradigmatic shift from “race-thinking” to ethnicity-thinking (Omi and Winant 1994:96) set the stage for the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (CRM), a political, legal and social struggle for racial equality that sought to dismantle de facto and de jure racism in America by targeting its racist and discriminatory laws and policies. After all, if racial inequality was not the by-product of biology but rather, was conditioned on social forces related to racism and discrimination, then it could be overcome. Black Americans, immigrant minorities, and their descendants could “eventually and inevitably” assimilate into the American mainstream. To

ensure minority groups' successful or complete socioeconomic incorporation, however, required the opportunity to participate fully in the larger economy and society. Towards this end, the CRM was effective in driving the passage of major legislation that outlawed racial segregation in employment, public places, and housing, lifted restrictive immigration policies, and terminated anti-miscegenation laws. This socio-historic moment of progressive race politics was reflected in greater racial tolerance and equality of opportunity than the antebellum or Jim Crow past.

Although this era is often painted in black and white, ethnic minorities including Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, participated in the movement and benefited from a changing societal reception context and anti-racist legislation that increased opportunities and improved their life chances (Johnson 1995).

An Economic Explanation for Racial Inequality

Wilson (1978) referred to this political and economic period as the modern industrial era. He argued that unlike the pre-industrial era, which required the racial oppression and exploitation of black slave labor, or the industrial era, which required racial oppression to buttress class conflict between union workers and strike breakers, skilled and unskilled labor, and wage workers and capitalists, the modern industrial era did not require racial oppression. In other words, Wilson (1978) argued that economic transitions condition race relations, and in the modern industrial period, race had declined in significance. This shift in racial dynamics, from racial oppression to racial equality, was possible because the structure of the modern industrial era, which was characterized by a declining manufacturing sector and an emerging high-tech, flexible, and high-skilled sector, did not require competition or conflict between racially-stratified segments of the labor force like the economic systems of the past did. Moreover, this period overlapped with the start of a postwar economic boom and progressive civil rights

legislation, which increased job opportunities and protected racial and ethnic minorities from racial discrimination in employment, as egalitarian racial dynamics replaced hierarchical ones.

Yet, by the mid-1970s, the economic boom, busted. A reversal of fortune took place that effectively quashed the “triumph of liberalism” and halted the nascent trajectory of racial parity. The rise in international trade, the oil crisis and ensuing recession, and the shift away from Keynesian economics, are all factors that contributed to the end of the postwar boom, and laid the foundation for the restructuring of the US economy (Dumenil and Levy 2004). As durable goods manufacturing moved overseas and the defense and aerospace industries contracted, the U.S. economy began to resemble an “hourglass,” as jobs increased at the top and bottom of the labor market, whereas good-paying, blue collar union jobs decreased in the “narrowing middle” (Portes and Zhou 1993; Valdez 2011). Racial and ethnic minorities, especially those employed in the middle and low skilled sectors of the labor market, were hardest hit (Morales and Bonilla 1993). In this context, the economic absorption and mobility of black Americans and post-1965 immigrants, the vast majority of whom came from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, was stunted. Moreover, the greater size and diversity of the immigrant flow, in terms of social class, legal-political status, composition, geographic concentration, and the positive or negative societal reception context that greeted these “non-phenotypically white groups,” combined with fewer opportunities for mobility in the hourglass economy, which resulted in divergent patterns of economic incorporation among whites and non-white groups that continue to this day (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Rumbaut 1994).

When compared against whites, non-whites today fare about the same or worse than non-whites of the past in educational and occupational attainment, income, wealth, and unemployment. For example, Irwin, Miller, and Sanger-Katz (2014) report that over the last

forty years the unemployment rate between blacks and whites has remained essentially unchanged. In 1972, African-Americans were twice as likely as whites to be jobless, and this ratio persists in 2013. Goldin and Katz (2014) reveal a 17 percent gap between black and white 30 year olds with a college degree in 2012, which they note, is “considerably wider than the 10 percentage point gap in 1970.” With regard to wealth, Kochhar, Fry and Taylor (2011) found that the median wealth of white households is “20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households.” Moving beyond race alone, Stewart and Dixon (2010) examined the intersections of race and nativity on earnings. They found that Asians, blacks, and Latinos fared significantly worse than their white counterparts in both the native and immigrant populations, with immigrants experiencing earnings that were “considerably worse” than their native and non-Hispanic white counterparts over time and generation. Even among ethnic minorities that are sometimes labeled as “honorary whites,” the empirical research challenged the presumption of Asian American advantage, finding instead that this racial group was more likely to be unemployed and less likely to supervise a large number of employees than whites. Furthermore, and consistent with the findings on the intersection of race and nativity, Asian immigrants earned less than Asian Americans and whites. Thus, all things being equal, the trajectory of convergence in the earnings, incomes, educational and occupational attainments of whites, blacks, Latinos and Asians, did not last past the 1970s. By the 1980s and beyond, persistent socioeconomic disparities were observed between whites and non-whites.

Consistent with his economic argument, Wilson contends that today’s observed racial inequality in the economic life chances of minorities has less to do with racism and more to do with the opportunity structure of the economy. Economic uncertainty following restructuring was responsible for the declining demand for low-skilled labor in urban areas where low-skilled

black and Latinos concentrated, while global competition increased joblessness among blacks and Latinos as durable goods manufacturing moved overseas (Wilson 2008: 59). Wilson (1987; 2008) concluded that such structural changes explain racial inequality in the post-civil rights period, and are responsible for the emergence of the “truly disadvantaged,” or ghetto underclass. For this latter group, typified by inner-city black, Puerto Rican, and Latinos who face extreme joblessness and who concentrate in racially segregated communities where a third of households fall below the poverty line, racial disparities in economic outcomes were primarily rooted in structural changes in the economy, and later, correlated with the development of cultural “pathologies” that resulted from such disadvantaged circumstances. Cultural factors, including high rates of joblessness associated with a skills-mismatch, unwed motherhood, drug addiction, informal or illicit employment, and a lack of role models, specifically, the black working and middle classes, who relocated to better suburban neighborhoods during the modern industrial era, complicated the plight of underclass minorities. Although Wilson continues to maintain that racism is not a significant force that conditions blacks’ life chances, he concedes that the “culture of poverty” that took hold in underclass black communities may have unintended consequences that, for example, now shape employer hiring preferences for non-underclass employees. According to Wilson, solutions to the underclass include policy prescriptions that create economic opportunities, including government job training programs, tax breaks for business owners who hire “hard to employ” workers, and investments in “enterprise zones.”

Although economic restructuring fomented the development of underclass communities among disadvantaged black and Latino subgroups, Wilson (1978) maintained that unprecedented economic opportunities for minorities existed in the modern industrial era. This was due, in part, to civil rights legislation, which facilitated minority access to middle class social and economic

life. A consideration of the minority middle class is useful, as it permits an assessment of minority economic integration among the most “assimilable,” by focusing attention on those more advantaged racial group members who have benefited from greater access to educational and occupational opportunities in the post-civil rights era.

Yet, as Patillo-McCoy (2000), Feagin (1993), Massey and Denton (1998), and Oliver and Shapiro (1997) observe, this relatively privileged black subgroup has not reached parity with the white middle class in size, housing, residential segregation, occupational attainment, income, or wealth. These scholars argue that racism remains a crucial factor in constraining the life changes of middle class blacks, the majority of whom are lower middle class. For example, Mary Patillo-McCoy’s (2000) nuanced study revealed differences between middle class blacks and whites that stemmed from historical and contemporary structural racism. Specifically, job discrimination in the private sector and discrimination in lending and housing contributed to the concentration of the black middle class in lower paid, middle class occupations in the public sector and in racially segregated “black belts,” which surround more impoverished black neighborhoods, areas which compete for limited resources that are shared between both groups. Likewise, Massey and Denton (1997) *American Apartheid* revealed that during the first half of the twentieth century, whites in power sought to isolate growing urban black populations from encroachment in predominately white residential areas and communities. Despite the Fair Housing Act of 1968, racial segregation persisted due to an interdependent set of factors including individual actions, institutional practices, and governmental policies. Feagin (1993) argued that the black middle class confronted racism in public places and institutions, including a pattern of racial profiling by police and store clerks, poor or no service in restaurants, and racial slurs and hate-based violence in the streets, despite their middle class status. Feagin’s research (2006) is not limited to

instances of racist individuals or everyday interactions, what are labeled “microaggressions”; he contends that racism is systemic, made up of “a diverse assortment of racist practices; the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites, the continuing resource inequalities; and the white-racist ideologies, attitudes, and institutions created to preserve white advantage and power” (Feagin: 2001: 16). Similarly, Oliver and Shapiro (2006) state that a “realistic appraisal of the economic footing of the black middle class reveals its precariousness, marginality, and fragility.” They explain that wealth inequality “has been structured over many generations through the same systemic barriers that have hampered blacks throughout their history in American society: slavery, Jim Crow, so-called de jure discrimination, and institutionalized racism” (12-13). They determine that the white middle class and black middle class effectively comprise “two nations.” The take-away from these studies is that economic parity with middle class whites has not been achieved, and that a central determinant preventing full incorporation is rooted in individual racist acts, racist institutional practices, and systemic racism. These studies challenge economic explanations for disparities in the life chances of blacks, underscoring the continuing significance of racism in shaping their economic conditions in the post-civil rights period.

Racial Inequality as a Political Process

In their seminal work, *Racial Formations*, Omi and Winant (1994) challenged Wilson’s class-based argument. They argued that class is a separate individual and social group identity from race and therefore, cannot simply replace the “social fact” of race in its meaning, significance or consequences. They wrote, “...from the perspective of the class paradigm, racial dynamics manifest these more fundamental [class-based] processes; only secondarily may [racial dynamics] take on a “life of their own” or a “relative autonomy” (1994:49). Instead, they

suggested that race, as a category of individual and collective identity, was a separate and distinct social group formation from class (or ethnicity, or nation), and that race relations were a political process. The racial formation process determined what race meant and structured social relationships accordingly (Omi and Winant 2013: 963). Although Omi and Winant (1994) acknowledge that racial inequality persists in the contemporary period, they insist that the civil rights movement fomented a real change in racial dynamics. They contend that contemporary racial inequality is a new incarnation, stemming from a political “racial reaction” by neoconservatives, who are seeking to retain their power and privilege by dismantling or rolling back race-equity policies.

The 1980s neoconservative countermovement thus sparked the retrenchment of white racial hegemony (Winant 1998; Omi and Winant 1994). Social welfare programs and race-based policies like affirmative action were targeted for termination by linking them to immigrant, ethnic and racial minority overuse and abuse. Politicians and pundits redefined race-conscious legislation as government overreach; at the same time, however, neoconservatives lauded the impact of civil rights legislation, which they claimed effectively outlawed racial discrimination. As such, whites and non-whites alike now had the equal opportunity to succeed in the American economy and society. To continue with race-based programs in this era of racial democracy constituted no less than “reverse racism” against whites. Academics also weighed in. Nathan Glazer’s 1975 book, “Affirmative Discrimination,” and Charles Murray’s 1984 book, “Losing Ground,” made the case that affirmative action and other government policies of “preferential treatment” only served to increase entitlements, foster a culture of poverty, and condone reverse discrimination. Murray’s 1994 follow-up with Richard Herrnstein, “The Bell Curve,” went further, or perhaps, backward, revising older scientific racism tropes to make the case that

observed socioeconomic disparities between racial groups reflected “natural” racial differences in I.Q. (Hardisty 1999). This neoconservative discourse fueled the campaign to dismantle race-based equity programs.

Omi and Winant (2013) argue that this “racial reaction” effectively reduced civil rights gains; yet, they contend that “major reforms” including the civil rights acts have “proved irreversible.” Although the neoconservative backlash and other forms of retrenchment and rearticulation have emerged to dampen civil rights reforms, they conclude that the civil rights movement forced the “recognition and validation by both the state and civil society of racially-defined experience and identity” (2013:966). They believe that this transition has resulted in greater racial equality, inclusion, and social justice and instability to white racism.

In support of this claim, recent studies of the minority middle class have underscored this point – highlighting the ways in which middle class minorities have attempted to achieve greater racial equality through coethnic and coracial strategies rooted in racial subjectivity. For example, the minority cultures of mobility framework (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 2010; Vallejo 2012) does not start from the premise that contemporary ethnic and racial minorities will follow in the footsteps of European immigrants. Instead, it recognizes that racial stratification in the United States effectively excludes “non-phenotypically white” ethnic minorities from “becoming white,” regardless of their class position. This perspective acknowledges that ethnic and racial minorities are likely to experience racial discrimination and bias in majority-minority relations, such that their process of incorporation is necessarily altered by negative and unequal interactions with whites and mainstream institutions. Thus, the minority middle class is perceived as disadvantaged, requiring the development of coethnic and coracial strategies to alleviate or lessen the impact of negative experiences of racism. Strategies include seeking out

and participating in minority organizations and maintaining cultural, bicultural, or symbolic ties to the minority community (Vallejo 2012). For example, Vasquez (2012) found that incidents of discrimination encouraged middle class Mexican Americans to embrace their ethnic or racial identity (as “Mexican” or “Latino”) as a form of reactive solidarity. She also found that interracial marriage did not lead to “social whitening” as much as it resulted in increasing biculturalism among family members (2009). Her work reveals that middle class Mexicans often confront a negative societal reception based on perceived and ascribed characteristics; this process of racialization conditions discrimination that results in a “bumpy” assimilation pathway.

The minority cultures of mobility framework affirms that middle class minorities who maintain ties within their community enjoy support and protection from the psychological cost of racism and racial discrimination that is unavoidable in majority-minority race relations. The development of minority cultures of mobility is especially salient in light of the fact that middle class minorities are more likely to interact with whites than their working or underclass counterparts as a consequence of living, working, and consuming in predominately white spaces.

Notably, Vasquez (2011) suggests that although racialization influences middle class Mexicans’ self-identity and acculturation, it does not hinder their structural (economic) assimilation, which she sums up as “racialization despite assimilation.” This conclusion is consistent with the minority cultures of mobility approach, which presumes that the minority middle class has achieved economic parity with whites, even as it concedes that as non-phenotypically white minorities, full integration into the white mainstream is beyond their reach. In other words, the minority cultures of mobility framework concludes that middle class minorities do not and cannot follow an Anglo conformity or “straight-line” trajectory of assimilation. In so doing, this approach recognizes the salience and centrality of racism in

fostering unequal minority-majority relationships, even if it falls short of acknowledging the material impact that structural racism has on middle class minorities' economic outcomes. In a stark contrast to studies of the black middle class, newer studies that focus on the Mexican American middle class (Jimenez 2009; Vasquez 2011; Vallejo 2012) tend to deemphasize economic disparities that persist between the minority middle class and the white middle class, and downplay evidence of institutional, systemic or structural racism. For example, Jimenez (2011) speculated that through a process of immigrant replenishment, or the unique pattern of Mexican migration typified by the perpetual arrival of new immigrants, middle class Mexicans did not assimilate as fully as the earlier wave of white European immigrants did. In particular, he notes that due to immigrant replenishment, middle class Mexican Americans are sometimes perceived as unwelcome, unauthorized foreigners. Jimenez acknowledges the “non-trivial’ role of race” in this process, but downplays its centrality. Instead, he contends that immigrant replenishment is the crucial factor that impedes full assimilation for Mexican Americans, the absence of which allowed European immigrants to join the white mainstream. Likewise, Vasquez (2011) suggests that racialization may hinder Mexican Americans' straight-line assimilation; however, it is one of many factors, including individual and background characteristics, gender, household strategies, family narratives, name, and immigrant replenishment, which combine to shape a “bumpy” assimilation trajectory. In these examples, the role of racism in conditioning economic inequality is downplayed, whereas evidence of economic incorporation is emphasized.

The economic and political arguments detailed here offer competing explanations for racial progress and inequality; nevertheless, both maintain that the civil rights movement ushered in reforms that improved the lives of racial and ethnic minorities, and further that in its wake, the

power of (white) racism has declined or at the very least diminished. For Wilson (1978), the civil rights movement was largely responsible for legislation that facilitated the emergence of a black middle class that, in the modern industrial economy, granted unprecedented access to middle class social and economic life. Although Omi and Winant (1994) do not identify specific subgroups that transcend racism per se, they do suggest that political changes including the civil rights act of 1964 facilitated greater equality in education and the workplace, in keeping with Wilson's contention that the emergence of the black middle class represents to some extent the positive changes that have occurred after the CRM. Moreover, they conclude that the "politicization of the social," or the injection of racial subjectivity into the political process, has provided an avenue of minority integration in spite of racism, which is captured by studies that employ the minority cultures of mobility framework.

Colorblind Racism

According to Omi and Winant (2013:966), "the recognition and validation by both the state and civil society of racially-defined experience and identity...broadened and deepened democracy itself." Nevertheless, they acknowledge that this transformation has also conditioned the development of a counter movement by the right: a rearticulated hegemonic ideology that has been labeled "colorblindness" or "colorblind racism" by critical race theorists (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Bonilla Silva 2006; Gallagher 2003; Omi and Winant 2013). A colorblind ideology and practice "rests on the assumption that race should not be important in contemporary society and that today, it is most important to move beyond color and deal with people as individuals, not groups" (Bell and Hartmann 2007). By using the language and discourse of the progressive social movement against itself, Gallagher (2003) contends that colorblindness allowed "many whites to define themselves as politically progressive and racially tolerant as

they [proclaimed] their adherence to a belief system that does not see or judge individuals ‘by the color of their skin’ (Gallagher 2003:27).” In other words, in the immediate post-civil rights era, racism and racial oppression were deemed historical artifacts and mainstream society was rearticulated as one that was meritocratic, thereby negating the need for race-equity programs. The development of a colorblind perspective was and remains a crucial step in maintaining white racial hegemony in an era committed to egalitarian racial relations.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) contends that a colorblind ideology, or colorblind racism, is a subtle but effective form of race relations discourse and practice that justifies and explains racial inequality through non-racial means. Simply put, colorblind racism constitutes the “common sense” notion that contemporary racial inequality has nothing to do with racism. This presumption is rooted in the belief that, following the civil rights era, race equity laws and practices “effectively ended” de jure and de facto Jim Crow racism. In the contemporary period, racial and ethnic minorities are thought to experience equality of opportunity in the American economy and society, consistent with the American Creed, such that their life chances now rest on individual drive, ambition, and merit. Observed racial inequality is thus rooted in individual failure and bad choices, rather than understood as endemic to the American social structure (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) has identified four colorblind frames that buttress this “blaming the victim” stance, including abstract liberalism, or the assertion that all people are treated equally in America; cultural racism, or identifying racial inequality as the by-product of a specific group’s cultural deficiencies or excellence (i.e., “culture of poverty” or “Tiger mom” arguments); the naturalization of racial group differences, which underscores “preferences” or “inclinations” as the culprit for any observed racial differences -- such as the “decision” to live in a racially segregated neighborhood for increased comfort; and lastly, the

minimization of racism, which downplays the cost and consequences of racism or embraces the idea that racism is not that salient in determining one's life chances because, after all, "everyone is a little bit racist." These colorblind frames provide various explanations and justifications for racial disparities that share in common the same basic premise: racial inequality in America is the result of "anything but racism" (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2001:117).

Introducing a race-based critical approach to explain persistent racial inequality in the post-civil rights era is useful, because it introduces an alternative framework of the American social structure that deviates from the mainstream economic and political discourse that emphasizes broad racial progress and democracy, in spite of persistent and observable racial inequality. Rather, it starts from the premise that the American economy and society is a highly stratified, racialized social system. In such systems, racial classification determines placement in stratified economic, political, social, and ideological arrangements (Bonilla Silva 1997:469). As such, "the race placed in the superior position tends to receive greater economic remuneration and access to better occupations and/or prospects in the labor market... [and] occupies a primary position in the political system (Bonilla Silva 1997:470)..." Accordingly, the development of a colorblind ideology is central to the reproduction of a racialized social system, because it "guides the actions of racial actors in a society."

America's Racialized Social System

Understanding the American social structure as a racialized system requires a balanced consideration of the economic and political context, and how these structures combine to shape racial hierarchies. Although Wilson (1987) emphasized the role of the economy in shaping the racial landscape, he dismissed the continuing significance of race in conditioning unequal life changes between whites and non-whites in the modern industrial period, which was particularly

salient in the advent of global capitalism and neoliberalism. Moreover, and as Omi and Winant suggest, Wilson too readily accepted the “triumph of liberalism” ushered in by the civil rights movement, and thereby failed to recognize the significant impact of the neoconservative backlash in rolling back race-based legislative gains before they could take hold. Likewise, Omi and Winant (1994; 1998; 2013) have been faulted for neglecting to grasp the dire consequences associated with the neoconservative “racial reaction,” which critical race scholars maintain has culminated in the development of a particularly “unsubtle” New Jim Crow, observed in racialized mass incarceration, (Alexander 2010) mass deportation of Latino and black immigrants (Golash-Boza 2015), and the racialized foreclosure crisis (Rugh and Massey 2010:646), to name a few. Additionally, their understanding of racial dynamics as primarily a political process tends to discount the significance of the economy as a distinct driving force of racial inequality. Under global capitalism and neoliberalism, however, the competition for resources is determined, in part, along racial lines. Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) conception of a racialized social system captures the importance of economic and political structures together in determining and reproducing racial inequality; further, it suggests that an ideology will emerge to reinforce and reproduce it. Thus, the hegemonic ideology of colorblindness is wholly compatible with neoconservatism and neoliberalism, and ensures the reproduction of racism in the contemporary period.

The economic transition to neoliberalism, or the contemporary incarnation of globalization (Brenner and Theodore 2002), suggests that open, competitive, and unregulated markets facilitate economic development (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349). This neoliberal turn in the economy is observed in increased privatization and outsourcing and decreased regulation, organized labor, corporate taxes, and welfare programs (Brenner and Theodore 2002:350;

Bloome and Western 2011). Researchers observe that neoliberal policies increase inequality for most Americans, regardless of ethnic or racial classification, but concede that minorities are particularly disadvantaged (Rugh and Massey 2010; Bloome and Western 2007; Sassen 1990; Golash-Boza 2015). For example, Bloome and Western (2011) conceded that the civil rights movement increased educational opportunities for black men in the 1970s and 80s; yet, this increase did not translate into positive earnings. Rather, they suggested that because of the changes in the American labor market associated with global capitalism and neoliberalism (i.e. declining unionization, increasing casual employment, the erosion of the minimum wage, and the like), the effect of educational attainment on current earnings is less salient today than it has been in the past (Western and Rosenfeld 2011).

Complementing this economic doctrine, neoconservatism emphasizes the principles of individualism, limited government, and competition (Winant 1998:755-6). Such beliefs promote a laissez-faire approach to race relations that reproduces and even widens racial group disparities (Bonilla-Silva 1997). For example, Wilson, Roscigno and Huffman (2013) demonstrate that the shift towards privatization has disproportionately disadvantaged black men by widening a racial gap between whites and blacks in occupational mobility. They attribute growing racial disparities in supervisory positions in the public sector to increased employer discretion that has eroded the reforms of the past. Similarly, Saskia Sassen (1990) argued that deregulation and privatization has led to the growth of the informal sector of the economy, increasing the numbers of immigrants that engage in non-standard, casual work arrangements. The economic conditions of neoliberalism and political doctrine of neoconservatism are supported by the ideology of colorblindness, which shapes corresponding race relations. These economic, political, and

ideological social forces are constitutive of Bonilla-Silva's (1997) conception of the racialized social system, and together, ensure the reproduction of unequal racial dynamics in America.

That said, a critical race approach maintains that racism is unidirectional, perpetrated by whites against blacks (and by extension, non-black racial minorities). This perspective implicates whites in the reproduction and persistence of racism because as the group at the top of the racial hierarchy, they alone possess the power and capacity to support or dismantle systemic racism in America (see Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin, Vera and Batur 2000; Moore 2007:114-115; Tatum 1997). Critical race scholars have argued that the American social structure serves to protect the interests, material, political and otherwise, of whites, the dominant racial group, and furthermore, that to achieve a fundamental change in American race relations would require a social movement that includes whites who are willing to recognize and compromise on their position of privilege. Yet, the emphasis on the white/black binary and specifically, that of *white racism against blacks* does not necessarily capture that against non-black groups, as new or different arrangements may develop; for example, the racialization of Latinos based on a lack of English proficiency or possessing a foreign accent (Perea 1997). Furthermore, the emphasis on whites' agency alone in reproducing racism overlooks the potential agency of non-white racial minorities in maintaining or altering American race relations.

Although blacks and other minorities do not enjoy the privileged position of whites at the top of the racial hierarchy, they too are embedded within the racialized American social structure. As such, it is likely they play a role in reproducing the American racial hierarchy, however tangential or indirectly. The emphasis on white racism against blacks, however, does little to provide the space to develop or entertain complex relations between multiple racial groups at different positions within the racial hierarchy. The agency of racial minority groups in

reproducing or transforming racism is unclear, but cannot be presumed to reflect that of whites, given their comparatively subordinate position and thus their limited capacity to shape or alter the existing racialized social structure.

Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2001) observed that blacks in Detroit engaged in colorblind racism when discussing affirmative action and residential and school segregation. They suggested, however, that blacks do so to a lesser extent or in an “indirect” manner than whites do. In particular, they conceded that some blacks employ colorblind racism, such as their use of cultural stereotypes to explain racial differences (e.g. “blacks are lazy”) or their belief that racial segregation is “natural” or “no one’s fault” (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2001:52). Nevertheless, black Detroiters’ also recognized that racial inequality is partly an outcome of structural forces, whereas their white counterparts generally did not. Thus Bonilla-Silva and Embrick conclude, somewhat unconvincingly and uneasily, that “many blacks” are only “slightly colorblind” (62). Yet, does the recognition of systemic racism lessen a belief in colorblindness, as Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2001) suggest? If, as they observe, a black man justifies racial inequality by stereotyping blacks as possessing a cultural deficiency, does his assertion that structural inequality matters offset his conviction of that particular cultural stereotype for that specific outcome? Does it lessen the impact of cultural racism in reproducing racism in society?

Ethnic and racial minorities’ role or agency in reproducing racism or racial inequality likely does not have the same impact as whites’ agentic processes, as this latter group maintains the dominant, privileged and more powerful position within the American racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, as social actors within a society that is stratified by race, minority group members are also socialized to perpetuate the dominant colorblind ideology. To alter the hegemonic discourse would require whites and non-whites alike to reject colorblindness and question

whether racial progress and democracy are “eventual and inevitable.” Although some critical race scholars have concluded that in the current political and economic context and at least for the “foreseeable future” (Crenshaw 1988:1336), the substandard socioeconomic fate of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States appears to be sealed, there is evidence of a fledging countermovement rising against racial oppression. This countermovement has been sparked by incidents of police brutality against unarmed black men. What started as predominately black protests has developed into a multiracial movement for social justice.

Conclusion: Towards an American Racial Democracy?

Conceivably, in the absence of the 1970s economic crisis and the rise of global capitalism, the progressive civil rights movement might have taken a stronger hold, ushering in a racial democracy that would have effectively ended or curbed substantially, persistent racial differences in the socioeconomic life chances of whites and non-whites. And although not the focus of this essay, it is worth considering whether economic parity would have been reflected in greater tolerance for social or cultural inter-group relations. It is possible to imagine that greater structural assimilation would be met with greater social or cultural assimilation, or both. At the very least, it is likely that in a sustained period of economic growth, racial parity in socioeconomic opportunities and outcomes enforced through legislation, might have also influenced or altered race relations more generally. It appears however, that the transition from a robust economy to a weak one may have undercut the promise of the civil rights movement and prevented a racial democracy from full realization. The conditions for a racial egalitarian order in the United States, then, seem to rest on the relationship between the economy and polity. A strong economy can support a progressive movement that seeks to realize racial parity; however, a weaker economy is likely to dismantle any efforts for the development of a racial democracy,

and further, often supports a retrenchment of racial oppression that is enforced with the emergence of a complementary ideology.

A white racial hegemony has characterized the preindustrial, industrial, modern industrial and neoliberal economies. An examination of these transitions calls into question whether the United States could ever achieve racial parity. This essay suggests that in the context of a strong and growing economy, a progressive movement could gain traction, and further, that American minorities may play a central role in challenging the hegemonic colorblind ideology and sparking a new multicultural civil rights movement. Yet, capitalism is based on a highly stratified social system, and so far has required racial stratification as one of multiple social groupings that are used to determine such hierarchical arrangements. So a fair question to ask is whether racial parity could ever be reached in the context of a capitalist system, or whether it would require at the very least, the maintenance of other persistently unequal social group formations, such as those of national-origin, gender, ethnicity and the like, for that realization.

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