

Toward a Race-Critical Sociology

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In 1973 Joyce Ladner and a group of influential and mostly African-American scholars produced a volume announcing *The Death of White Sociology*. The volume—which included contributions from such luminaries as E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Clarke, and Charles Hamilton—had at least two basic goals. The first was to organize and disseminate the wealth of sociological research into the reality and variety of African-American lives that had emerged during and immediately after the era of Civil Rights. The second objective followed directly from the first but was even more ambitious and radical. It was to suggest that these findings of difference and disadvantage posed deep challenges for conventional liberal, Western, positivist, and universalizing—in a word, “white”—understandings of sociological theory and practice. A passage from Lerone Bennett’s *The Challenge of Blackness* (1972) supplied the group’s rallying cry and manifesto:

It is necessary for us to develop a new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts. It is necessary for us to develop and maintain a total intellectual offensive against the false universality of white concepts We must say to the white world that there are things in the world that are not dreamt of in your history and your sociology and your philosophy.

For Ladner and her colleagues, a sociology truly attentive to color offered more than just a study of people of color and their particular problems. It represented even more than a contribution to the ongoing struggle for African-American freedom, equality, and justice. A sociology attentive to color promised, in their conception, nothing less than a new understanding of sociology itself.

Today, a quarter of a century later, the proclaimed passing of “white” sociology appears naively optimistic, little more than a quaint relic of the heady, hopeful days of the immediate post-Civil Rights era. Not only has white sociology not died, it remains, in most respects, as entrenched as ever. Moreover, whatever alternative Ladner and her colleagues may have offered seems to have gone the way of fashion or fad.

Many sociologists surely breath a sigh of relief or even openly applaud at this development. I do not. Indeed, I believe the decline and virtual disappearance of the Ladner critique is a serious loss for the discipline, one that not only compromises our ability to understand race but that also makes it much more difficult to think critically and constructively about the assumptions and biases built into many of our standard social-scientific practices and methods. What is more, I find it deeply ironic (if not tragic) that this has happened at a time when many of the race-based theoretical impulses that motivated Ladner and her colleagues have been taken up with great vigor and productivity by scholars in disciplines and departments across the American academy. Among these prominent scholars are Robin D.G. Kelley, Charles Payne, and David Roediger in history, Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, David Theo Goldberg, Neil Gotanda, and Patricia Williams in legal studies,

George Lipsitz in American studies, Peggy MacIntosh in women's studies, and Lisa Lowe, Wahneema Lubiano, and Toni Morrison in literature.

This article is intended to renew and revitalize the race-based critical approach to social analysis and cultural critique originally envisioned by Ladner and her colleagues and recently extended by race-critical scholars. The objective is twofold: to begin to expand sociology's understanding of race and to begin to expand its understanding of itself. I will do this by developing the idea of a "race-critical sociology."

If the study of race is to make a real impact on sociological theory and practice, race must first be understood on its own terms, as an independent, irreducible social force. What is needed is a way of thinking about race that grasps this reality. Four specific principles (or propositions) not currently found in conventional sociological thinking about race and race relations can help forge such an understanding. First, race is a fundamental principle of social stratification—not merely a demographic variable, a "temporary" (if unfortunate) exception to liberal democratic ideals, or an irrational social-psychological state. Second, racial stratification is as much an ideological and cultural structure as it is a socioeconomic one. Third, nonwhite agency, resistance, and struggle must be understood not as separate from racial structures but as crucial components of them and their reproduction and transformation. Fourth, race cannot be seen merely as a social category to be thrown off or overcome but should also be understood as having deeper critical and transformative potentials—with respect to both social-scientific theory and practice and the regular politics of contemporary social life itself.

After fleshing out how a race-critical approach differs from the usual sociology of race and race relations, the article then suggests some ways in which this alternative framework might contribute to more grounded, reflexive social theories and social-scientific practices. And it is here, in considering the implications of these new understandings of race for the discipline of sociology as a whole, that the full promise and significance of a race-critical sociology can begin to be realized.

Race as an Independent, Irreducible Social Force

The most basic and fundamental claim of a race-based critical sociology is that race is an independent and irreducible social force in the United States, a distinct aspect of social organization and a unique lens onto the whole of social life. This is, of course, a broad and controversial claim, whose theoretical and empirical foundations can be only touched upon in a short essay. But let me begin by discussing one of its most obvious implications: that race should be treated as a distinct area of sociological specialization.

Race as an Area of Specialization in Sociology

To many scholars who study race (whether from a race-critical perspective or from the standpoint of the standard sociology of race), the notion that race should be treated as a distinct area of sociological specialization may seem trivial or truisitic, but in the discipline of sociology taken as a whole, it is clearly not. In a recent study of the 677 articles having to do with "race relations" published in the last 25 years in four core journals of the field (*American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces* and *Social Problems*), Jack Niemonen (1997) found that race is almost always treated as a relatively minor dimension of broader social processes and conceptual rubrics. Ethnic and racial phenomena, according to Niemonen's analysis, were typically subsumed under the categories of

social psychology, stratification, demography, or political economy. That is to say, race and ethnicity were understood primarily as categories of social-psychological difference, dimensions of social stratification conceived within a materialist, class-based model or as simple demographic variables. Put another way, race and ethnicity referred not so much to race *relations* but to particular groups of individuals who are somehow different or disadvantaged.

To the extent that a distinctive sociology of ethnic and racial relations does appear in these journals, it tends to be framed and theorized in fairly narrow and quite particular ways. The *American Journal of Sociology*, for example, situates ethnic and race relations in the context of assimilationist theory—the theoretical framework developed most famously by Robert Park and his associates from the Chicago School, under the rubric of the race-relations cycle. Yet, as a conceptual framework, assimilationist theory has been out of sway with most sociologists of race at least since the 1960s because of the persistent power and prominence of racial and ethnic categories and identities during that period.¹ The *American Sociological Review* and *Social Forces*, Niemonen finds, treated race and ethnic relations as a refinement of ethnic-enclave theory, an approach that situates racial and ethnic phenomena in the context of capitalist-class relations. *Social Problems*, for its part, tended to use race-relations work as an example of collective-behavior or social-movements theory or to speak to general issues of group-based conflict and competition.

This is not to suggest that sociologists have abandoned the study of race and race relations as a distinct topic of inquiry and area of specialization altogether. Such an argument would be patently absurd. Not only have sociologists continued to produce a steady stream of publications focused specifically on racial issues, but some of these works—such as William Julius Wilson's trilogy on race and class (1978; 1987; 1996) or Massey and Denton's *American Apartheid* (1993)—have been among the most publicly prominent and politically influential pieces of sociological research to emerge recently. Rather, my point is that the conventional sociology of race—as visible and significant as it is both within the discipline and outside of it—has ironically had very little impact or influence upon social theory or the discipline as a whole. Race seems to remain a subfield or a case study—never an area of inquiry in and of itself, much less a source of knowledge and insight with implications for the whole of the discipline. Niemonen states the point most forcefully in his conclusion regarding the 134 *American Journal of Sociology* articles published between January 1969 and December 1995. These articles, in his view, make it clear that "the sociology of racial and ethnic relations has no claim to a status as a relatively autonomous, substantive specialization in sociology generally" (1997, 17).

Obviously, it is rather difficult to produce an independent, non-reductionist sociological theory of race if the discipline itself does not recognize race as an autonomous area of substantive specialization. But the discipline as a whole, in my view, is not the only guilty party here. Indeed, the standard sociology of race—that is, the study of race as it is typically conducted within the discipline of sociology—is itself largely to blame for this situation, since it is unable or unwilling to produce satisfactory, non-reductionist theories of, or explanations for, racial formations.

The Conventional Sociology of Race and Race Relations

A striking characteristic of the standard sociological literature on race and race relations is its overwhelmingly quantitative methodological orientation. Niemonen's study revealed that of the articles dealing with race published in the four core journals of the discipline, 81.5 percent (552 out of 677) utilized quantitative methods. Their dominance in the socio-

logical analysis of race is, of course, nothing new or surprising. Quantitative methods have long been the hallmark of the entire discipline. Nor are quantitative methods themselves inherently incompatible with race-critical approaches. Quite the contrary, because of their broad demographic reach and their impressive methodological rigor, quantitative sociological analyses of race have provided much of the empirical ballast for the race-critical scholarship now burgeoning in other disciplines and departments. Representative examples of this symbiosis can be found in the seminal article on antidiscrimination law by Kimberle Crenshaw (1988) or the recent works of George Lipsitz (1998), Lisa Lowe (1997), and Robin D.G. Kelley (1997). Each of these sophisticated race-critical treatments of American society relies heavily on conventional sociological studies of race as a way of substantiating and quantifying the broader social significance of their analyses.

The problem with the dominance of quantitative methods in the sociological analysis of race, then, is not the methods themselves but rather the uncritical, atheoretical way in which they are typically employed—what Niemonen calls their “abstracted empiricism” (1997, 18). Niemonen, in my view, is referring partly to the purely descriptive quality of much of this work and the concomitant reluctance to speculate about causal mechanisms. Although defended under the guise of scientific objectivity, this style of work may be motivated primarily by the discomfort, guilt, and fear that scholars inevitably confront when addressing causal questions of racism. Niemonen is also referring to the unrecognized theoretical assumptions and presuppositions of liberal individualism built into the survey-based data and techniques that most quantitative analyses utilize.

Taking individuals as the basic unit of action and analysis, on the one hand, provides sociologists with a fairly uniform, and ostensibly scientific, platform (which helps explain why, as Niemonen describes, much sociological literature on race is given over to methodological questions about measurements, identification and specification of variables, and appropriate statistical techniques and assumptions). On the other hand, this methodological individualism makes it very difficult to recognize and systematically explore the group-based, structural nature of most racial dynamics and formations as they exist in everyday life. This analytic strategy can conceive of race only as background, demographic variables, or properties of individuals, facts of social existence that are ultimately not to be questioned or explained in and of themselves. Ironically, this kind of tough-minded empirical individualism leaves researchers with only one of two radically different ways to conceive of race: either it is seen as a secondary and typically ephemeral characteristic (the old assimilationist model) or it is essentialized and treated as a fixed and unchanging category of identity and experience. Obviously, neither of these is satisfactory or sufficient.

To the extent sociologists of race and race relations speculate about structural theories of causation and change, they tend to opt for two significantly different explanations. The first and most typical approach is to explain racial formations and inequalities as a result of other, externally constraining circumstances, social forces, or processes, such as capitalist class relations or more general post-industrial economic conditions. Wilson's *Declining Significance of Race* (1978) is perhaps the most famous and controversial example of such “circumstantialist” approaches, but there are many others. Indeed, most of the dominant paradigms within the field—split labor market, internal colonialism, and minority niche—all see race as what Omi and Winant (1994) aptly describe as an “epiphenomenon.” Circumstantialist approaches are obviously built on the principle that race is a social construction. They are also inherently and appropriately critical of the inequalities and injustices associated with race. However, this body of work fails to answer why it is that race has provided and continues to provide the rhetorical and experiential categories through

which social actors understand social phenomena that are, ultimately, not supposed to be about race at all. More specifically, they are hard pressed to explain the experiences of individuals, such as highly educated, middle- and upper-middle-class African-Americans, who continue to be perceived and treated in strictly racial terms (cf. Feagin and Sikes 1994; Cose 1993; Feagin 1991; Landry 1987). And this is not even to mention the emergence of movements within and among communities of color that specifically privilege and celebrate racial differences even in the face of the inequalities that often accompany them. What such approaches ultimately do is not explain racial formations but rather, as Stephen Cornell and I have put it (1998, 66), explain racial formations away.

The other dominant explanatory paradigm, originally expounded by Gordon Allport (1958) in the middle of the twentieth century, attributes racial inequalities and injustices to prejudice and behavioral discrimination. This approach, which fits within an assimilationist framework because it locates the problems of race in the attitudes and beliefs of whites and sees these beliefs as ungrounded or nonrational, is popular among sociologists in general, but it fell out of favor with race specialists in the 1960s. One reason was that this approach attributes to whites all of the agency and impetus for racial inequality (or for potential progress and change). This both overstates the simplicity of white views and choices with respect to race and understates the role nonwhites play in constituting and contesting racial formations. But the deeper reason for the decline of prejudice-based theories was the empirical contradictions encountered in the post-Civil Rights era.

Studies of racial attitudes in the United States over the past several generations clearly demonstrate the decline of prejudice strictly conceived. At the same time, however, researchers continue to find persistent, and in some cases increasing, discriminatory behaviors and outcomes in schools, housing, and the workplace. The institutional and structural aspects of racial formations and inequalities are just one of the elements these individual-based theories cannot really account for. Another is the increasing subtlety and complexity of racism itself; more specifically, the way in which racism in the post-Civil Rights period has become less overt and emotional, as it has come to be more and more frequently couched in arguments about cultural deficiencies and rational economic self-interests (for critiques, see Landry 1993, 187-89; Lipsitz 1998; McKee 1993; and Wellman 1991, 27-62).

Nevertheless, prejudice-based theories of racial inequality tend to re-appear regularly among specialists in the field. Massey and Denton's (1993) otherwise excellent study of patterns of residential segregation is a case in point. On the one hand, their careful research definitively documents the independent and irreducible social force of race in the United States by showing that spatial isolation applies equally to nonwhites (especially African-Americans) across class lines and, therefore, cannot be attributed to class. They also suggest some ways in which this segregation is perpetuated by the practices of realtors, lending institutions, and American housing policies. In the end, however, they attribute all of this to “prejudice and discrimination” or “racist attitudes and behaviors.” “Whites,” Massey and Denton write, “still harbor strong anti-black sentiments and they are unwilling to tolerate more than a small percentage of blacks in their neighborhoods” (109). They claim that most whites “would not vote for a community law to implement this principle [of open housing], and most would not want to live in a neighborhood where more than a percentage of the families were black” (111).² While Massey and Denton's claims about prejudice and discrimination are not entirely incorrect, they do little to help us understand the power and persistence of racial ideologies, the ways in which these ideologies have changed since the Civil Rights movement, and how we might confront and change them. Once again, the limitations of conventional sociological theories of race and especially racism are revealed.

Aspects of a Critical Sociology of Race

The fundamental starting point of a race-critical sociology is that race is an independent and irreducible social force in the United States (if not elsewhere). Thus, it constitutes its own distinct area of sociological specialization and requires specific, non-reductionist theories, which, in my view, must be guided by four insights or propositions:

- (1) race is a fundamental principle of social stratification;
- (2) racial formations have ideological and cultural dimensions in addition to material-economic ones;
- (3) agency, resistance, and struggle are not in opposition to racial structures but are crucial components of them and of their reproduction and transformation; and
- (4) race has critical, transformative potential with respect to both social-scientific theory and practice and the regular politics of contemporary social life.

Race as a Principle of Social Stratification

Most specialists in the field already appreciate that race and racism are more than mere properties or peculiar social-psychological states by which individuals can be distinguished. Sociologists have staunchly—and quite correctly—insisted that the proper unit of analysis and critique for racial phenomena are systems of “race relations.” But if sociologists of race can agree that race (like class, but not necessarily reducible to it) is an organizing principle of social life affecting or implicating everyone in society, they are far less certain of how properly to formulate and defend this proposition or of how far to push the argument. Part of this uncertainty is rooted in the aforementioned tendency of sociologists of race to collapse back into unsatisfactory, individualist-oriented theories of prejudice and discrimination when theorizing about racism.

Despite the abstract analytic insight that racial formations are best understood in systemic and relational terms, in *practice* sociologists tend to view race in terms of the disadvantages or inequalities faced by communities of color. In certain respects, there is nothing wrong with this: systematic inequalities experienced by minority groups are the most obvious and appalling evidence that race matters and the best argument for why racial formations need to be understood, challenged, and changed. Yet, too often, this emphasis on the experience of racial inequality ultimately loses sight of the larger conditions and relationships within which it is contained, as well as of the specific actions and policies that continue to perpetuate and reinforce it. Massey and Denton’s work again illustrates the point. In regard to which (or whose) residential spaces Massey and Denton portray in racial terms in *American Apartheid*, Stephen Nathan Haymes’s (1995) comments, “What is interesting [is that] Massey and Denton do not consider geographical areas concentrated with whites as ‘racially’ hyper-segregated. Seldom do they identify the so-called broader society . . . in terms of a ‘racially’ defined geographical space, and when they do it is rarely mentioned as ‘white residential segregation’” (7). Despite their insights to the contrary (that is, their attempts to understand racial segregation as part of a broader system of social relations attributable to the prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior of whites), Massey and Denton conceive of racial segregation as a “black” problem. The consequences are numerous and unfortunate. Haymes discusses how, for example, they “transpose racial identity or stereotypical black images of disruptive behavior, attitudes, and values on to residential location” (8), and in so doing, place the agency and responsibility on African-Americans

themselves (and their supposed cultural shortcomings) even as the larger structural analysis denies them any meaningful possibility of resistance or change.

This does not deny that people of color are implicated in systems and structures of race, but this view redirects the lens away from minority-group disadvantage and inequality back toward groups privileged and advantaged by race (McIntosh 1989), as well as to the active social and historical processes and mechanisms that maintain racial hierarchies (see Landry 1991).

Much recent work in the social sciences, some written by sociologists, focuses on whiteness, white privilege, and white racism with the objective of reorienting the sociological analysis of race (see, for example, Lipsitz 1998; Kelley 1997; Feagin and Vera 1995; Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 1994; Frankenberg 1993; Wellman 1993). Unfortunately, as we have seen, this work has not had a tremendous influence or visibility in the discipline. The reasons for this can be traced back to an inability to appreciate the more cultural and ideological aspects of racial stratification and the reluctance to confront racism itself.

Cultural Dimensions

What animates or even unifies much of the scholarship on race produced outside of sociology in recent years is less a concern with race and stratification per se than an interest in the relationships between race and culture in contemporary life. (In addition to those works cited above, see Lowe 1997; Goldberg 1997, 1993; Gray 1995; Lipsitz 1994, 1991; Rose 1994; Dyson 1993; Jhally and Lewis 1992; West 1990.) Culture, a notoriously vast and multi-vocal concept, is used in at least four specific senses in these works. It can refer to: (1) racial images and stereotypes; (2) racial identities and ways of life; (3) sites of construction and contestation (emphasizing, especially, the mass media and popular culture); and (4) ideologies, standards of justice, and fairness. Obviously, a detailed discussion of each of these is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. But two questions should be addressed here: Why are these cultural dimensions of race so important? And, why have sociologists not been more attentive to them?

The importance of ideological, image-based, and identity-oriented dimensions of racial formations is that they make it possible to distinguish and differentiate racial stratification systems and dynamics from other dimensions of social stratification. Only after the unique and particular meanings, identities, and experiences associated with race and racism are understood does it become possible to realize that the forms and forces that construct and reproduce racial hierarchies cannot be reduced to class interests and economic forces. As to the second question, sociologists typically have not recognized the cultural dimensions of race (or at least not believed them to be of immediate or primary importance) because of the materialist-utilitarian biases and presuppositions underlying their theories of social stratification and their established techniques for measuring and analyzing it. Omi and Winant’s (1994) analysis of racial formations in the United States since the Civil Rights movement is probably one of the most well-known and best counterexamples.³

Omi and Winant come to the problem of race from a fairly traditional Marxist perspective that emphasizes the socioeconomic causes and consequences of racial inequality. This is certainly appropriate and quite consistent with established sociological attention to the relational character of race. But they also realize that it is impossible to understand or explain the persistence of racial inequalities and hierarchies without delving into the power of racially specific ideologies, interests, identities, and practices. Race may not be more

important and foundational than other dimensions of social stratification, but it exerts its own independent and irreducible influence on the social organization of American life. Even though racial formations have material effects and consequences similar to those produced by class inequalities and economic relations, they are rooted in ideologies, understandings, identities, and interests that have forms and consequences of their own.

Agency, Struggle, Resistance, and Change

The third aspect of an alternative to conventional sociological theories of race and race relations is the recognition that agency, struggle, resistance, and change are not strictly in opposition to structures of racial stratification and inequality but are crucial components of those structures and of their reproduction and transformation. Scholars often neglect or ignore how existing racial hierarchies and ideologies are—and must be—actively, if not necessarily intentionally, constructed and reconstructed by the actions, policies, and practices of specific agents, institutions, and groups (Landry 1991). That is, the privileges and advantages associated with racial structures are not just passively perpetuated by unfortunate institutional legacies, historical arrangements, and systems of social relationships but are actively reproduced and reinforced by the agents and interests that benefit from them.

But this insight alone is not enough. Indeed, taken alone it can actually lead—as it does, for example, in Andrew Hacker's 1992 best-seller *Two Nations*⁴—to a kind of totalizing pessimism that sees racial stratification as static and unchanging because it lays complete blame, responsibility, and obligation at the feet of white people (who are assumed to have little or no reason to think or act in nonracist ways), and simultaneously allows little or no possibility for racially disadvantaged groups to resist, confront, challenge, and potentially change the conditions of their disadvantage and inequality. In contrast, it is important to assess the different ways in which racial agents are implicated in the ongoing processes by which racial structures and systems are produced and reproduced as well as transformed and potentially overturned. Omi and Winant's understanding of the racial state as an "unstable equilibrium" or "dynamic equilibrium system" is useful because these concepts were intended to emphasize the ongoing processes of social struggle and the exercise of power by which racial structures are produced, reproduced, and transformed. The point, as Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens might frame it, is that racial structures are not absolutely determined and determining. Instead, these structures are produced and reproduced by human agents, who constantly struggle against these constraints and against one another (with different interests and degrees of power and capital). Construction and struggle not only reproduce racial structures but they are the very means by which these structures are criticized, challenged, and changed.

Critical, Transformative Potentials

As powerful as Omi and Winant's work has been, it is important to recognize that although race may be a site for political agency and resistance, racial formations are still primarily sources of inequality and disadvantage, social phenomena eventually to be transcended and overcome. The problem with thinking of race strictly in these negative terms is that it gives us no way to grasp the broader critical and transformative potential pregnant in the recognition of racial differences themselves, on their own terms, independent of their unfortunate associations with social injustices.

Racial formations, to put it another way, are not necessarily all about power, inequality, and domination. They often embody ways of thinking about and acting in the world, and

they provide alternatives to dominant, mainstream hegemonic points of view and perspectives. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this is that peoples of color have embraced and celebrated their racial identities in recent decades. Although resistance against racial hierarchies, stereotypes, and ideologies requires that they be recognized and confronted directly, racial identities are often recognized and defended in and of themselves, without regard to the inequalities and injustices associated with them.

In a discussion of racial and ethnic movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Colburn and Pozzetta (1994) identify one aspect of the challenge that racial and ethnic movements present for American culture: "the pursuit of group solidarity represented an effort . . . not only to redefine themselves, but also to restructure America's public and political culture." Black power and ethnic activism, as Colburn and Pozzetta put it "sought more than just equal rights, employment opportunities and political gains; they also wanted to change the rules that governed American political life, to move beyond issues of individual rights and equality in order to address larger group needs and concerns" (121). Many other works could be mentioned, but all share an implicit critique of middle-class, mainstream American ideals. In this respect, I think a critical sociology of race holds the promise of a larger critique of dominant American ideals of individualism, meritocracy, and assimilation, along the lines of that achieved by radical feminists in the middle part of the 1970s, when they distinguished themselves from their liberal-egalitarian counterparts.

Implications and Conclusions

This article has elaborated a critique of conventional sociological approaches to race and race relations. It has also suggested an alternative theoretical framework—a framework that recognizes the power and importance of seeing race, race relations, and racism as autonomous, irreducible social forces. One danger of such an argument is that it can allow (or even encourage) the separation and disconnection of the study of race from mainstream sociological theory and practice. In arguing for a new and more independent theory of racial formations, my goal is to bring out the power and import of the influence of race on aspects of social life not typically thought to be racialized at all. I should also make clear that my objective is not to suggest that race is the most important or foundational dimension of social stratification in the United States or anywhere else. Quite the contrary, I would insist that race interacts and intersects with a variety of other social forces and factors, such as class, age, religion, gender, political affiliation, and so on, and I would argue against a way of thinking about social life that relies upon and makes claims for a single, monolithic, and objective theory of social differentiation and stratification (Hall 1992). These claims, in fact, suggest the broader implications and consequences of this project for the whole of sociological theory and practice.

I began this article with a discussion of the volume that predicted the passing of "White" sociology some twenty-five years ago. While my essay does not attempt to finish the job Joyce Ladner and her colleagues initiated, it has attempted to help us find its proper place in and contribution to the larger enterprise of crafting a truly engaged, appropriately critical, and properly reflexive sociology. An appropriately critical understanding of racial formations would expand sociological theory and practice in several respects. First, by recognizing the primacy of difference and emphasizing the reality of racial inequality even in a society committed to fair and equal treatment of individuals under the law, it cautions against sociology's grand, universalizing impulses. Second, recognition that the impacts of race are broad, pervasive, and unavoidable for everyone in society (not just those disadvantaged by it) requires a more grounded and reflexive engagement with research that has

a tendency to strive for political neutrality and objective detachment. Finally, by insisting that inequalities are not just the result of material-economic processes and identities are not simply equivalent to rational interests, a race-based critical approach to sociology gestures toward a more culturalist and pluralist understanding of the complexity and possibility of contemporary social life. A critical approach to race encourages a sociological vision that is grounded, pluralist, culturalist, and reflexive.

Recently, social theorists like Michael Burawoy (1998) and Craig Calhoun (1996) have called for a social theory and sociological practice that embodies these qualities and characteristics. Surprisingly, however, racial theorizing has not been prominent in the work of these theorists.⁵ This is unfortunate because the sociology of race I have tried to sketch out here could supplement, support, and extend their project. The genesis and evolution of Critical Race Theory in the last several decades provides a useful, closing example.

This scholarly movement started as an attempt to rethink legal understandings of race and racism in the face of unexpectedly persistent racial inequalities in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. At issue was the retreat from a recognition of the existence of race and racial inequalities and a retrenchment or reaffirmation of color-blind individualist rights and standards of proof that, by looking past racial inequalities and injustices, contributed to their perpetuation and exacerbation. By framing those issues as the problem it wished to explore, Critical Race Theory—which began strictly as an attempt to rethink race and racism—evolved into a broad-based critique of the American legal system itself: its emphasis on individual rights, its neglect of group-based interests, its notion of property, its standards of proof, and so on. Given the prominence and importance of race in American society, I believe that a proper, critically engaged, sociological approach to race, race relations, and racism could ignite and drive a similar dialogue in and about the discipline of sociology itself.

ENDNOTES

¹ The last major sociological statement and defense of assimilationism came in 1964 with the publication of Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life*. Nevertheless, assimilationism remains a powerful moral and ideological force in the United States today, and its normative assumptions get smuggled into much social-scientific writing. For a brief discussion and critique of the assimilationist paradigm as a framework for social-scientific analysis, see Cornell and Hartmann 1998, 39-42.

² Notably, Massey and Denton demonstrate only an association or correlation but not a causal link between prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. Nevertheless, they insist that other studies have "been carried out to document and quantify the link" (1993, 109).

³ One of the more interesting things to note about Omi and Winant's book, in my view, is how it has been received—or more precisely, by whom it has been received. As prominent and influential as Omi and Winant's book has been among humanist scholars and in cultural studies circles, it has garnered relatively little attention in sociology itself. This is particularly surprising since both authors were trained as sociologists, identify themselves as sociologists, and are seen as being sociologists by those outside the field.

⁴ For a critique, see Roediger 1994, 121-26.

⁵ A similar argument could also be offered with respect to feminist theory, which both Calhoun and Burawoy discuss but, in my view, conceive too narrowly and criticize too harshly. Indeed, it is my view that feminist approaches did in the 1980s what critical race work has begun to do for social theory in the 1990s.

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