Future Challenges: The Sociology of Racial and Ethnic Relations

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Writing in the late 1960s, the great sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois perceptively wrote this overview of the United States:

> [T]oday the contradictions of American civilization are tremendous. Freedom of political discussion is difficult; elections are not free and fair…. The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth…. Present profit is valued higher than future need…. I know the United States. It is my country and the land of my fathers. It is still a land of magnificent possibilities. It is still the home of noble souls and generous people. But it is selling its birthright. It is betraying its mighty destiny (Du Bois 1968: 418–419).

This diagnosis of U.S. civilization is still accurate. The contemporary contradictions of this country's political, economic, and other institutions remain extensive, immense, and potentially destructive of U.S. democracy. Aggressive white male apologists and implementers openly celebrate white nationalism, hyper-masculinity, and an unregulated "free market" economy. Still, the country is also a land of progressive possibilities, with many and growing citizens' groups opposing these oppressive racial, class, and gender trends.

Most of the articles in this volume illuminate aspects of what sociologist Joe Feagin has termed the *elite-white-male dominance system*. Historically, a European and European American elite, mostly male, has crafted and sustained this dominance system in North America, a system with great shaping effects on most of the planet's other countries. This elite is a very small percentage of the U.S. and global populations, yet still dominates in very powerful and highly undemocratic ways—economically, politically, and socially. Strikingly, it is largely unknown to most of those it so extensively dominates. The concept of the elite-white-male dominance system encourages us to think about *who* and *what*

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this distinctive elite is, and how it has dominated much of the world historically and in the present. This dominance system encompasses several major subsystems of societal oppression, not only the systemic racism central to all chapters in this volume, but also the systemic sexism (heterosexism) and systemic classism (capitalism) sometimes examined in them as well (Feagin and Ducey 2017: 1–50).

In North America, at the very top of all three of these major subsystems of oppression sit elite white men who are dominant in both numbers and power. In this volume we focus principally on the racial oppression they enforce, social subjugation that reaches into every major nook and cranny of U.S. society, and thus is systemic (Feagin 2006). As we suggested in the introduction, systemic racism involves the institutionalized patterns of subordinate and dominant societal positions, respectively, for people of color and for whites in a white-controlled, hierarchically arranged society. Our chapters demonstrate the systemic reality of white-imposed racism in the past and present, as it is seen in the exploitative and discriminatory practices of whites targeting people of color–and thus in the significant resources and privileges unjustly gained (and legitimated) by whites in that process.

24.1 The Countersystem Approach: Black Pioneers in Sociology for Change

The goals of sociology and much other social science have long revealed a major tension between seeking to remedy racial and other social injustice and seeking mainstream acceptance as legitimate academic disciplines, especially legitimacy from the powerful white male elite. While a majority of sociologists and other social scientists have generally accepted the academic status quo and the larger elite-white-male dominance system, from the late 19th century onward some have aggressively developed a *countersystem* framework oriented to a much more critical view of social science and society. These social scientists have undertaken much significant research aimed at understanding, and then reducing or eliminating, key elements of systemic racism. This countersystem approach involves stepping outside mainstream social science reluctance to directly theorize and research white-racist institutions and to develop theory-based and data-based critiques of these persisting institutions central to systemic white racism (see Sjoberg and Cain 1971). As a result, such countersystem analyses have frequently led to studied considerations of alternative, more just societies.

Thus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of black male and female sociologists did much innovative countersystem research on U.S. racial matters, leading them to take informed positions on the country's ending the oppression of black Americans and other Americans of color. Among these often forgotten black sociologists were W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Anna Julia Cooper. All developed important sociological ideas and research projects, especially attacking the racist ideas generated by whites' scientific racism of their era. In our considered view it is well past time for sociologists and other social scientists to reclaim their important ideas, insights, and methods. Note too that they are among the earliest founders of sociology as a scholarly discipline.

Consider, for example, the brilliant W. E. B. Du Bois. In 1896 he was hired by the University of Pennsylvania to do a study of black Philadelphians using the "best available methods of sociological research" (Du Bois [1899] 1973: 2). His resulting book, *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1973), was the first book-length sociological study of an urban (black) community. Soon, with this book in hand, Du Bois sought to create an academic program that would focus on social scientific research on black Americans. Since no white-run institutions were interested in hiring him or setting up such a program, he accepted a professorship at Atlanta University, a historically black institution. There in the first decade or two of the 20th century, working with numerous scholars at other historically black institutions, he built up the *first* truly scientific

program of research in the history of U.S. sociology. Yet, their pioneering efforts are still rarely recognized in mainstream social science disciplines.

Using innovative conceptual frameworks and empirical research methods (e.g., field observations, surveys, interviews, U.S. census materials), this Du Bois-Atlanta school of sociology made early and important contributions to the sociological study of black community, family, and racial problems, as well as to important historical studies. They insistently challenged the white racist categories and theories inside and outside the academia of their era (Morris 2015: 57–69). In addition, in this early period there were important black women sociologists, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper, whose work has recently also been rediscovered (Cooper 1892; Wells-Barnett 1895). Because of institutional racial and gender exclusion they did most of their sociological research and analysis outside of academia.

More recently, and accenting this black countersystem tradition, sociologist Ladner ([1973] 1998) has underscored how contemporary scholars of color have regularly forced issues of racial oppression to be seriously assessed by academic sociology. She and other sociologists of color have also pressured the discipline to consider multiple oppression statuses and intersectionality, especially linkages of racial and gender oppression (Baca Zinn and Dill 1994).

24.2 Countersystem Analysis and Social Justice

Unmistakably, these scholars of color have not only developed an alternative fund of social science knowledge, but also moved the recognition and use of this knowledge from the societal margins into ever more central research efforts of sociology and other social sciences. Over several decades, this accumulating knowledge from the margins has become extraordinarily important in understanding how systemic white racism actually operates, and thus in contributing to organized societal-change efforts by community and national activist groups seeking to reduce systemic racism's many institutionalized patterns. Additionally, these pioneering sociologists of color, women and men, have offered critical role models in their commitments to gaining social-scientific knowledge by utilizing both a solid countersystem conceptual framework and frequently innovative research methods. By the 1960s and 1970s, their critical scientific work was finally being recognized by more contemporary social scientists of color in various fields–and increasingly by a slowly growing number of white social scientists who adopted their perceptive countersystem approach (Feagin 2001).

In our view many more contemporary sociologists and other social scientists need to engage in, cultivate, and enlarge this long-standing countersystem approach, not only in regard to investigating systemic racism and its racial inequalities, but also with regard to advocating for alternative social systems that are far more just and egalitarian. Systemic racism needs much more research showing the *how* and *why* of its maldistribution of goods and services, as well as of the oppressive intergroup relations responsible for that massive and unjust maldistribution. These hierarchical racial relations encompass inegalitarian power relationships and unjustly unequal access to essential socioeconomic resources. Such coerced inequality determines whether individuals, families, and community groups are included or excluded from society's important decision-making processes. It centrally shapes the development of individual and group racial identities, as well as the sense of personal dignity. It is clear from earlier and contemporary countersystem research that ending systemic racism must entail a thorough restructuring of U.S. society's unjust, alienating, and inegalitarian racial relationships (Feagin et al. 2015).

A *countersystem* approach involves serious reconsideration of methods, that is, of how we actually do sociology and other social sciences. Numerous sociologists, including many in this book, have done considerable and pathbreaking analyses of the character and impact of racial and class subordination. They have pioneered in new

methods with a countersystem dimension. For example, some social science researchers on several continents have utilized participatory-action-research strategies that incorporate countersystem ideas and methods. Many have worked collaboratively with ordinary people at the grassroots level; these efforts often target how to dismantle the oppression of, and develop societal alternatives to, the established status quo (see, for Latin America, Fals-Borda 1960). These countersystem researchers eschew sterile analyses aimed at academic readers and instead regularly work to construct resource and power bases for those faced with local or national patterns of racial and class discrimination and impoverishment, and associated political disenfranchisement. In our view, if sociology and the other social sciences are to make a difference in a world of countries under constant threat and reality of severe racial and class inequalities, the legitimacy and extent of countersystem research strategies must be greatly enhanced. Extensive research involving collaboration between social scientists and community organizations seeking solutions to local problems of discrimination and inequality must be pushed to the forefront, and thus should be positioned in the respected core of serious social science research—where it was at the birth of U.S. sociology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Sjoberg and Cain 1971; Feagin 2001).

Also very important is the significant social justice morality of this countersystem approach. It is often forgotten that the everyday practice of all social science involves *moral* activity. US society is greatly structured by racial and other societal oppressions, and much sociological theory and research methodology reflects this oppressive reality to some degree. Indeed, all social science perspectives incorporate an underlying view of what society should be like. Unsurprisingly, countersystem approaches often accent a broad human rights framework in which each person and group is entitled to fair treatment and to social justice–and to a society in which all are entitled to social institutions backing up these rights. Some countersystem social scientists (e.g., Sjoberg 1996) have suggested that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) developed by the new and more diverse United Nations in the late 1940s could be an important starting place for developing a lasting human rights framework to guide social scientists in their everyday research.

Consider the UDHR that was finally approved in 1948. This great international document was constructed by several UN drafting and vetting committees and adopted by a multinational and multiracial United Nations General Assembly. Among its pathbreaking rights is Article 1, which firmly states human equality: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Many other articles lay out the specific rights that fall within this overview. For example, Article 29 emphasizes democratic societal structures and individual community responsibilities: "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible… everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society." Numerous other human rights that fall within this framework are laid out in rich and thoroughly vetted detail (United Nations 2016).

Some have argued that the UDHR is only a western (white) human rights document. This is incorrect, as a long drafting period insured that representatives of many countries and subnational groups—many of them people of color—actually reviewed, revised, and then supported it. Western rights concepts did greatly influence the Declaration, but major ethical and communal rights concepts stemming from all continents–Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, North America, and Latin America–were imbedded in language stating human rights principles then and now considered universal. For instance, a Chinese delegate, the scholar P. C. Chang, made sure that Asian understandings of human rights and duties were considered well and concretely

imbedded. Working with representatives of non-western areas, he insisted that the UDHR accented broadly relevant concepts of brotherhood, moral growth, pluralistic tolerance, the "will of he people" as governments' basis, and community duties as balancing individual rights (Chu 2016; Twiss 2010: 110–112).

Even more importantly, this non-western group was anti-colonialist and thus forced an emphasis on the right of all peoples to *self-determination* to be part of the document. This viewpoint of subordinated peoples of color directly challenged the extensive western colonialism still dominant in this postwar era. As a result, the Declaration opens with a relatively radical opening asserting that stated UDHR principles represent a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society… shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms… [and] to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and *among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction*." The latter phrase referenced the people in then (e.g., European) colonized territories as having full human rights and freedoms. These strikingly prescient assertions more or less insured that this UDHR would be used by many countries in preparing international agreements; it has also been cited in numerous legal decisions by various country's courts, as well as by the international courts (Henkin et al. 2009: 216). Subsequently, the general statements for human rights and against racial and other discrimination in the UDHR have been further developed, specified, and framed by subsequent implementing covenants on economic, social, and political rights–which have been agreed to, albeit sometimes with reservations, by most United Nations members. They include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was added to the UDHR and thereby created an International Bill of Human Rights (Feagin and Ducey 2017: 251–254).

24.3 Peoples Movements for Racial Justice

Today, issues of racial and other social injustices are being forced to the forefront by tens of thousands of people's movements, most of which have been developed by people of color, in many countries around the globe. These currently include numerous indigenous rights movements and other anti-racist organizations. These movements usually accent concepts of racial justice, and emphasize human rights such as those in the UDHR that are viewed as requiring resource equity, fairness, and respect for cultural and racial diversity. This necessarily includes demands for, and efforts at, eradicating well-institutionalized societal structures of racial oppression. Many peoples' movements have also made clear that effective racial justice requires substantial resource redistributions away from those who have unjustly secured them and then socially moved to those justly deserving them.

As the UDHR and associated conventions insist, this also necessitates the creation of truly democratic structures guaranteeing real participation of ordinary people in a country's everyday political-economic decision-making. Western political theory commonly accents that ordinary people have a right to self-rule, but much theory also notes that in practice this right is delegated to a people's elected representatives—thereby suggesting that better-educated people serve as government leaders who act in the general public interest and under impartial laws. However, countersystem and other research shows that there is *no* such impartial political and legal system in supposedly democratic countries such as the United States. In fact, the actual U.S. reality is one of a hierarchically arranged society in which a mostly white and male elite has created and sustained over centuries an economic, political, and legal structure that disproportionately reflects and achieves their distinctive and inegalitarian societal goals and interests. As we suggested earlier, this elite-white-male dominance system, and its component systemic

racism, must be fully recognized for its thoroughly oppressive character, and then if social justice is desired, must be fully dismantled. Clearly, only a decisive redistribution of unjustly gained socioeconomic resources and decision-making power to those from whom these resources and power were unjustly stolen can ensure real socio-racial justice and authentic popular democracy (Feagin 2001).

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