

U.C.

The White Racial Frame

Centuries of Racial Framing and
Counter-Framing

Joe R. Feagin

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Preface

In November 2008, more than two centuries after this country's founding, Senator Barack Obama became the first American of color ever to win the U.S. presidency. He won nearly 53 percent of the total national vote, compared to about 46 percent for his white opponent, Senator John McCain. Since Obama's election, the increase in emphasis on the United States being *post-racial* has been dramatic, especially among whites and in the mainstream media. From this perspective the United States is now a society where racism is in great decline, a society that is indeed colorblind.

Like many media outlets, the national business newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*, framed Barack Obama's election as a great tribute to how democratic and non-racist the United States now is:

A man of mixed race has now reached the pinnacle of U.S. power only two generations since the end of Jim Crow. This is a tribute to American opportunity, and it is something that has never happened in another Western democracy—notwithstanding European condescension about “racist” America.¹

After this assertion of moral superiority over Europe, this white-framed editorial added: “One promise of his victory is that perhaps we can put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country. Mr. Obama has a special obligation to help do so.”² Writing from a common white viewpoint, this editorial writer further called on President-elect Obama himself to lead the effort to kill the supposed “myth of racism.”

But did this election really signal a major decline in racism in the

United States? Even the election itself was revealing on this score. While it was not as close as the two previous presidential elections, it was close enough that a shift of just 4 percent or so of the total voters from Obama to McCain would have given McCain a national victory. Moreover, if it had only been up to white voters, Senator McCain would have become the 44th U.S. president, for he won an estimated 55 percent of the white vote nationally, and a substantial majority of white voters in 32 of the 50 states. In contrast, more than two thirds of voters of color voted for Senator Obama.³

In some ways, the United States came out of the 2008 presidential election more polarized and segregated than it was a generation or so ago. Researchers have shown that about *half* of all the presidential votes cast were in counties where Senator Obama or Senator McCain won by at least 20 percent of the total vote. The percentage of voters residing in these very polarized “landslide” counties has grown substantially, from 27 percent in 1976 to 48 percent in 2008. Even more striking is the racial polarization of these counties. Those where candidate McCain won with a landslide margin of 20 percent or more were overwhelmingly white, with the black and Latino voting age population averaging only a sixth of those counties' populations. Where Obama won a county, in contrast, the black and Latino population averaged about 43 percent of the voting age population. Paralleling this voter polarization, moreover, is the continuing and extensive residential and public school segregation that is revealed in research on U.S. towns and cities.⁴ Without a doubt, even with the election of an African American president, the harsh reality of institutional racism in major sectors of U.S. society is still quite evident.

Today, those who do this significant research and analysis of U.S. racial patterns frequently make use of a disease metaphor, such as the idea that racism is a “cancer” in the “body” of society. In a recent search for phrases like “racism is a cancer” or the “cancer of racism” in published research papers and popular articles, including on the Internet, I found thousands of uses of this strong metaphor. The commonplace idea here is that racism is an unhealthy social condition, one stemming from pathogenic conditions in an otherwise healthy societal body. Yet, this view is both misleading and inadequate. Our society was built from the beginning with racial oppression as a *central part* of its societal structure. There never was a “healthy” societal body which the cancer of racism could invade.

In this book I argue that a much better societal metaphor is that of racism as an important part of the structural “foundation” of the U.S. “house.” Racial oppression was not added later on in the development of this society, but was the foundation of the original colonial and U.S. social systems, and it remains as a foundation to the present day. This

structural-foundation metaphor relates much better to the historical and contemporary reality of this country, and it is the one I prefer in this book. I recently searched hundreds of relevant academic research papers and many important Internet websites for phrases like “racial foundation of the United States,” the “country’s racial foundation,” and the “nation’s racial foundation,” and not one such phrase appeared. In light of the historical and contemporary data assessed throughout this book, this structural-foundation metaphor captures the actual realities of colonial and U.S. racism much better than a disease metaphor. From its first decades, as I demonstrate in the next chapters, racial oppression has been indeed part of this nation’s *undergirding foundation*.

This political-economic reality is significantly different from that of any other major industrialized country in the West. European countries like Great Britain and France were central to centuries of European colonialism, including the Atlantic slave trade and slave plantations in the Americas, but their early and later growth specifically as nations was not built directly on an *internal* labor force of enslaved African Americans or on the land stolen by recent conquests of millions of indigenous people. Given these strikingly different historical realities, then, one would expect that the long term consequences of these histories for systemic racism to be significantly different.

Knowing North American racial history is very important for making sense out of the current realities of this society. For many years, I have been researching this history in an attempt to analyze accurately the major impacts on U.S. culture and institutions of this country’s foundation in systemic racism—in slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and contemporary discrimination. In this book we will examine the many lasting legacies of past oppression in contemporary racism. We will explore evidence of systemic racism in the colonial and U.S. economic, legal, and political systems, up to the present day. As in the past, systemic racism today includes the complex array of exploitative and discriminatory white practices targeting Americans of color, the institutionalized economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and the dominant racial frame that was generated to rationalize white privilege and dominance. *Systemic* here means that the oppressive racist realities have from the early decades been institutionalized and thus manifested in all of this society’s major parts. Break a three-dimensional hologram into its separate parts and shine a laser through any one, and you can project the whole three-dimensional image again from that part. Much like this hologram, major parts of this society, such as the economy, politics, education, religion, the family, reflect in numerous ways the fundamental reality of systemic racism.

In this book I focus mainly on systemic racism’s reality as it operates in

and through what I term the *white racial frame*, the broad, persisting, and dominant racial frame that has rationalized racial oppression and inequality and thus impacted all U.S. institutions. I explain in detail what I mean by this white racial frame in the next chapter, but for now let me note that the white racial frame is a centuries-old worldview and has constantly involved a *racial construction of reality* by white and other Americans, an emotion-laden construction process that shapes everyday relationships and institutions in fundamental and racialized ways. For the period of North American development from the early 1600s to the present day, I track closely the societal persistence and evolution of this well-developed racial framing of society.

In particular, I accent the holistic and gestalt character of this overarching white racial frame. As I show, this omnipresent white frame encompasses much more than verbal-cognitive elements, such as racist stereotyping and ideology, concepts emphasized by most scholars of racial matters. It includes many other important elements, such as deep emotions and visceral images, even language accents and sounds, that have long been essential to the creation and maintenance of a system of racial oppression. Today, as in the past, this dominant racial frame is taught in thousands of different ways—at home, in schools, on public playgrounds, in the mass media, in workplace settings, in courts, and in politician’s speeches and corporate decisions. As a result, in its turn this dominant racial frame both rationalizes and structures the racial interactions, inequalities, and other racial patterns in most societal settings.

In my view the best social science is both interpretive, searching for complex webs of meanings connecting particular individuals and their everyday groups, and thoroughly empirical, bringing relevant data to bear on important societal questions. In this book I use a broad interpretive approach that examines the complexities of interpersonal and intergroup meanings and relationships in this still highly racialized society and that brings much empirical data, historical and contemporary, to bear on critical questions about how this society works in its everyday racial framing and related social operations.

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CHAPTER 1

The White Racial Frame

Why a New Concept?

The better we know our racial past, the better we know our racial present. The United States is a young country, just over 400 years old if we date its beginning from Jamestown's settlement. For much of this history, extreme racial oppression in the form of slavery and legal segregation was our foundational reality. The first successful English colony was founded at Jamestown in 1607, and a few years later in 1619 the first Africans were purchased by English colonists from a Dutch-flagged slave ship. It was exactly 350 years from 1619 to 1969, the year the last major civil rights law went into effect officially ending legal segregation. Few people realize that for *more than 85 percent* of our history we were a country grounded in, and greatly shaped by, extensive slavery and comprehensive legal segregation.

In terms of time and space, we are today not far from our famous "founding fathers." There have been just three long human lifetimes since the 1776 Declaration of Independence was proclaimed, a document principally authored by the prominent slaveholder Thomas Jefferson. We are just two long human lifetimes from the 13th amendment that ended two-plus centuries of slavery. And we are only one human lifetime from the era when viciously segregationist mobs brutally lynched African Americans and other Americans of color, and when many whites, including Supreme Court justices and U.S. Senators, were members of the Ku Klux Klan, the world's oldest violence-oriented, white supremacist group. For just four decades now, we have been an officially "free" country without massive legal discrimination. Certainly, that is not enough time for this

country to eradicate the great and deep impacts of three and a half centuries of extreme racial oppression that preceded the current era. Much social science analysis of major aspects of this society today, as I show throughout this book, reveals the *continuing* impact and great significance of the systemic racism created by these long centuries of extreme racial oppression.

Let us consider briefly some contemporary spatial impacts. In its geographical patterns the twenty-first century United States clearly demonstrates the impact of this oppressive past. Even a brief study of the U.S. demographic map reveals that a substantial majority of African Americans today still live in just fifteen of the fifty U.S. states—and very disproportionately in southern and border states. In these states, as elsewhere, the majority of these truly “old stock” Americans reside in racially segregated areas of towns and cities. In many cities there are still the infamous railroad tracks, as well as major highways, that clearly divide them into communities of mostly whites and communities of mostly people of color. Why is this highly segregated residential pattern still the reality in this “advanced democracy”? The answer lies in the centuries of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racial discrimination that have set firmly in place and maintained this country’s important geographical contours. For the most part, these racially segregated areas and geographical dividing lines are not recent creations, but have been shaped by white decisionmakers’ actions over centuries. Consider too that these distinctive area patterns signal much more than information about our geographical realities, for they have many serious consequences for much that goes on in this society. We can see this clearly, to take just one example, in the racially polarized voting patterns for the landmark 2008 election noted in the preface.

Well into this twenty-first century, racial segregation and separation along the color line is also very much a major part of our psychic geography. Racial separation affects the ways in which white Americans view our society, especially on racial matters. The evidence of white denial and ignorance of the reality of U.S. racism is substantial. For example, one recent national survey of 779 whites found that 61 percent viewed the average black person as having health care access at least equal to that of the average white person. Yet, the field data show whites are far more likely to have good health insurance and to get adequate medical care than black Americans. About half the white respondents felt that black Americans had a level of education similar to or better than that of whites. Half the white respondents felt that, on average, whites and blacks are about as well off in the jobs they hold. Once again, the research data show that neither view is true. When the results of several such questions were combined, 70 percent of whites were found to hold one or more erroneous beliefs

about important white-black differentials in life conditions. Moreover, only one in five whites evaluated the current societal situation accurately on a question about how much racial discrimination African Americans faced. The majority of whites are willfully ignorant or very misinformed when it comes to understanding the difficult life conditions that African Americans and other Americans of color face today. Interestingly, in another survey white respondents were asked if they “often have sympathy for blacks” and again if they “often feel admiration for blacks.” Only *five percent* of whites said yes to both questions.¹

One goal of this book is to examine why so many white Americans believe what is in fact not true about our important racial realities. In insisting on these apparently sincere fictions about black life conditions, the majority of whites exhibit serious collective denial in believing what is demonstrably untrue. The principal reason for these strong white views is what I term the *white racial frame*. This racial frame is an overarching worldview, one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations. For centuries now, it has been a basic and foundational frame from which a substantial majority of white Americans—as well as others seeking to conform to white norms—view our highly racialized society.

Mainstream Social Science: The Need for A New Paradigm

Traditional social science and other mainstream academic analysis has mostly portrayed U.S. racism as mainly a matter of racial bigotry, prejudice, and stereotyping—of racial attitudes directed at outgroups that indicate an ethnocentric view of the world and that incline individuals to take part in bigotry-generated discrimination. These concepts, though useful, are far from sufficient to explain the systemic racism of the United States. We need more powerful concepts that enable us to move beyond the limitations of conventional social science approaches. The traditional approaches do not capture or explain the deep structural reality of this society’s racial oppression in the past or the present.

The dominant paradigm of an established science makes it hard for scientists to move in a major new direction in thinking or research. Almost all scientists stay mostly inside the dominant paradigmatic “box” because of fear for their own careers, as well as out of concern for accepted scientific constraints. One important barrier to developing new social science paradigms is that new views of society are regularly screened for conformity to preferences of elite decisionmakers in academia and in society generally. This vetting and validation process is implemented by research-granting public agencies, faculty advisors in academic programs,

promotion reviews in educational institutions, and public criticism of scholars who deviate.²

Today, most mainstream social science analysis of racial matters is undertaken and accepted because it more or less conforms to the preferences of most elite decisionmakers. For this reason many of the racial realities of U.S. society have rarely or never been intensively researched by social scientists. Ironically, U.S. social scientists who research societies overseas often accent the importance of uncovering the hidden empirical realities and concealing myths of other societies, yet are frequently reluctant to do similar in-depth research on their home society.³

Since the full emergence of the social sciences in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainstream social scientists have periodically developed influential theories and concepts designed to interpret "racial and ethnic relations" in this society. These mostly white mainstream analysts have historically included such prominent scholars as Robert E. Park, Gunnar Myrdal, and Milton Gordon. These influential scholars and their associates have usually had difficulty in viewing U.S. society from any but a white, albeit often liberal, racial framing. Moreover, over more recent decades the broad analytical perspectives and much conceptual terminology of mainstream researchers like Park, Myrdal, and Gordon, though periodically elaborated and revised, have continued to significantly influence the way that a majority of social scientists and other researchers have viewed and researched important U.S. racial issues.⁴

Certainly, the mainstream "race relations" theories and concepts have provided handy interpretive tools for understanding numerous aspects of racial oppression in this society, but they also have significant limitations and carry hidden assumptions that frequently trap analysts into a limited understanding of racial inequalities and related racial patterns. Included among these are traditional concepts such as bigotry, prejudice, stereotype, race, ethnicity, assimilation, and bigot-generated discrimination. These concepts have been widely used, and are often valuable, but they do not provide the essential array of conceptual tools necessary to make sense out of a highly racialized society like the United States.

These conventional concepts tend to be used in decontextualized and non-systemic ways. Even a quick look at today's social science journals and textbooks reveals the frequency and limitations of these concepts. Those analysts who use them tend to view racial inequality as just one of the U.S. "social problems." Numerous social problems textbooks dealing with racial issues have a section or chapter on something like the U.S. "race problem," as do numerous other textbooks such as those used in law school courses dealing with the U.S. Constitution and racial issues. This "problem" view is similar to the cancer view of racism mentioned in the

preface, in that the problem is considered to be just an abnormality in an otherwise healthy system.⁵ This approach typically views the race problem as not foundational to society, but rather as temporary and gradually disappearing as a result of our advanced modernity. Thus, one common approach in these conventional analyses is to view historical or contemporary acts of discrimination as determined by individual prejudice or by a concern for the prejudices of a few others. This bigot-causes-discrimination view is, like numerous other mainstream views, generally oriented to individual or small-group processes and does not examine the deep structural foundation in which acts of discrimination are always imbedded.⁶

Classical Social Scientists: Trapped in a White Racist Context

The habit of not thinking realistically and deeply about a country's undergirding racial structure extends well beyond U.S. social scientists, past or present, to the most prominent figures in the long tradition of Western social science. Consider the still influential, towering intellectual giants of the Western tradition such as Max Weber, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud. They loom large in much contemporary U.S. and Western social science, yet *not one* of these intellectual giants gave serious research or analytical attention to the systems of racial oppression that operated conspicuously within Western countries' imperial spheres during their lifetimes. They did not assess in any significant way the racialized oppression that played out in front of them as a central aspect of European imperialism and colonialism. Not even Karl Marx, the vigorous critic of class oppression who knew Western history well and wrote articles for a New York newspaper about U.S. issues, paid any sustained attention to the highly racialized character of the colonizing adventures overseas by Western governments and corporate enterprises. It is a truism to note that a social science analyst's societal context often limits his or her research and analysis. But, even so, the widespread omission of a serious and sustained analysis of Western racial expansion and oppression, and the consequent structures, is particularly striking given how fundamental these processes and structures have been to the global dominance and prosperity of Western countries.

Historically, of course, almost all influential social science theorists and analysts have been white, and almost all of these have been male. These influential analysts have characteristically viewed Western racial matters from a usually educated version of the dominant white racial frame, which I explain fully in the next section of this chapter. For the most part, these white theorists and analysts have been handicapped by their privileged position in European and U.S. racial hierarchies, and by the fact that they typically think out of the broad racial framing that most whites at all social

levels have used for centuries. Take the example of Max Weber, who died in the early twentieth century but has had a great impact on U.S. and other Western social science ever since. Like other social scientists of his era, he held to the tenets of blatant biological racism, a view that infected his historical and geopolitical arguments, yet one that almost never gets critically discussed in the social science textbooks and empirical analyses that to this day use his important concepts. Weber wrote openly and unreflectively of the "hereditary hysteria" of Asian-Indians, of Africans as genetically incapable of factory work, and of the Chinese as slow in intelligence and docile, with these latter traits viewed as significantly shaped by biology. As with most scientists of his day, central to Weber's work was the idea of "Western rationality," which he viewed as having some hereditary grounding. Western capitalism had evolved through the process of "modernization," which Weber and his educated peers regularly contrasted to the "traditionalism" of "Oriental" civilizations. Weber held to the white Eurocentric view that contemporary European capitalism was the endpoint in a successful evolutionary process—an "intellectual progression, an ascent of human 'rationality,' meaning intellect and ethics" from ancient society to modern society.⁷ Beyond Europe, other countries were viewed as "traditional" and thus to some degree backward and irrational. The contemporary scholar, Edward Said, has described this as an ideology of "Orientalism," an old Western-centered framing unable to see beyond its Eurocentrism.⁸ Since the time of Max Weber, indeed, Western social scientists assessing European industrialization and capitalism have continued to accent, explicitly or implicitly, some type of European rationality and superiority in modernity.

To take a more recent example, we can note the leading U.S. social theorist and analyst, Harvard professor Talcott Parsons. Parsons viewed U.S. racism as an anachronism representative of a premodernist mode of thinking and one likely to be dissolved with yet more U.S. industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. Even a scholar who probed deeply into the major values of Western civilization, as Parsons did, was unable to see the racialized "water" in which he metaphorically swam, the water of a sophisticated white racial framing of Western societies.⁹ That frame and the system of material racial oppression it aggressively rationalizes have always been much more than a "premodern survival" attached to an otherwise advanced society. Both the system of racism and its rationalizing frame have long been part of the foundational realities of U.S. society, yet not one of the major mainstream theorists in the U.S. social science canon has substantially analyzed and understood that foundation.

Consider too that the idea of Western civilization's modernity, which includes a superior "rationality," has long been important in U.S. and

other Western analysis, from Max Weber's time to the present day. The term "modernity" has functioned as social science shorthand for industrial and technological civilization, for societies shaped by the views that human beings should actively transform physical environments, that market economies are best, and that bureaucratized nation-states are necessary for societal well-being.¹⁰ Yet this idea of modernity emerged about the same time as the white framing that, since at least the 1600s, has rationalized racial oppression in North America and elsewhere. The concept of "advanced Western civilization" grew out of the extensive European and European American history of imperialistic subordination of peoples of color and, thus, often within the social crucibles of slavery and genocide. Modern "civilized" societies were first conceptualized over against "traditional and inferior" societies, such as those of the "Orient" or those of indigenous peoples in the Americas and Africa.

According to contemporary analysts of Western history, modern Western societies supposedly have proceeded well beyond the premodern impulses of group irrationality, primitive superstition, and primitive violence. Yet the European enslavement of Africans in North America and the European-generated genocides targeting indigenous peoples across the globe, which operated openly until a century or so ago, did *not* result from premodern violent impulses somehow breaking through modernity, but rather these actions did and do constitute the economic and cultural foundations of Western modernity—with its advanced sciences and technologies, international markets, developed nation-states, and overseas military adventures. Racial oppression and its rationalizing and structuring frame have long been central to modern and imperialistic Western societies, indeed to the present day.

The White-Centered Perspective of Contemporary Social Scientists

Today, one observes the continuing reality of a white-centered framing in many contemporary social science analyses and in numerous other scholarly and popular analyses of U.S. society. As with canonical scholars like Max Weber, the language chosen to describe a society demographically or sociologically often reveals white perspective. For many scholarly and popular analysts in the United States (and across the globe) the English word "Americans" is routinely, if unconsciously, used to mean "white Americans." Terms like "American dream" and "American culture" are typically used to refer primarily to the values, ideals, or preferences of whites. In addition, language deflection strategies are often used to play down or circumnavigate racial matters. For example, a great many social science and popular analysts of this society phrase their analytical sentences about U.S. racial issues in the passive tense (such as, "prejudice has

been a problem over the years for African Americans”), or they put vague or general nouns in the subject position of important sentences about racial issues (“society discriminates against Latinos”). By these and similar artifices, the important white actors who did or do specific acts of racial oppression are not positioned as active agents and named as such in the key sentences of a serious book’s text. Of course, all authors need a diversity of sentences in order to maintain readers’ interest, and using such passive or general phrasing might be in order to maintain that interest. However, in too many cases such sentences are not there for diversity of presentation, but rather to avoid directly asserting that whites, in general or in particular, are the critical actors in the long U.S. drama of racial oppression. Whites are, as it is sometimes said in defense of such writing strategies, just “implied.”¹¹

In addition, in many social scientists’ writings a good scholarly discussion of the white role in U.S. racial issues, such as in slavery or legal segregation, is somehow balanced with some positive statements about whites because these authors apparently feel a great need to say something good about whites in the same era. An example is paralleling a written section on “bad slaveholders” with another section on supposedly “good slaveholders,” an oxymoronic phrase indeed. Take the case of George Washington. Numerous white historians have portrayed him as a superior “moral” leader and “good” slavemaster in spite of his bloody involvement in extending the slavery system. The same George Washington periodically asserted his harshly negative stereotyping of African Americans, had enslaved runaways chased down, participated in the callous raffling off enslaved workers, had enslaved workers whipped, and even had teeth taken from the mouths of those he enslaved for his own mouth. One otherwise critical historian insists Washington was “not a racist” and that “his unique eminence arises from his sterling personal qualities . . . and from the eerie sense that, in him, some fragment of divine Providence did indeed touch this ground.”¹² Similarly, otherwise critical white social scientists seem to be unable to name accurately the gendered brutality often directed at black women during the slavery and legal segregation eras as “rape” or “coerced sex.” Thus, pioneering historian Winthrop Jordan noted that “white men of every social rank slept with Negro women” and that “miscegenation was extensive” in English colonies, but he did not use the words “rape” or “sexual coercion” in his analyses of this bloody, often violent white male behavior.¹³

Today remarkable numbers of white scholars and policy analysts seem surprised or puzzled about the constant recurrence of blatantly racist incidents, events, and commentaries in this society. They have often accepted a contemporary racial framing that views U.S. society as truly “colorblind”

or “post-racial” and considers racism to be dead or in significant decline (see Chapter 5). Even scholars of a liberal inclination regularly tiptoe around or underestimate the depth and extensiveness of racial hostility and discrimination today. For example, the liberal political writer and influential neuroscientist, Drew Westen, has recently remarked on contemporary whites in this fashion: “It’s not that most people *want* to be racist anymore.” Similarly, liberal economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman has argued that U.S. whites are becoming much less racist, so much so that this has made possible a presidential victory like that of Senator Barack Obama in 2008.¹⁴ The serious errors in these uninformed commentaries will become clear in later chapters. Suffice it to say here that just because there seem to be fewer overtly racist actions and performances by whites today in public—at least performances that are viewed as racist by whites—does not mean that whites’ racist thought and action in this society has sharply decreased to a low level. A great many contemporary U.S. scholars and popular analysts of all political backgrounds seem unable to step outside a white-centered perspective on racial matters in their research and analytical writings to see our racialized world as it really is.

The White Racial Frame: Dimensions and Impact

Today, we are in the early stages of developing a major new conceptual paradigm on U.S. racial matters, with a new array of conceptual and interpretive tools and a growing number of social scientists, legal scholars, and others starting to realize the old “racial relations” paradigm’s limits.¹⁵ Those working in this contemporary paradigm are attempting to develop a better theory of racial oppression, one that shows racial oppression’s deep structures, assesses its dimensions and reproductive processes, and demonstrates how both inertial forces and change forces have shaped it over time. For this we need innovative, better, and agreed-upon analytical and interpretive concepts, including resurrected concepts from the counter-mainstream tradition of scholars of color such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Oliver C. Cox (see Chapter 7). Inspired by this long tradition, I make much use in this book of strong concepts like the white racial frame, the black counter-frame, and institutional and systemic racism. These concepts link well to critical insights that help us build a better social science paradigm that fosters research into the racial foundation of this society. The empirical world of racial experiences is diverse, complex, and saturated with meaning, and these always structured experiences often have no adequate analytical categories in traditional social science.

The central concept of the white racial frame that I suggest and develop

in this book is one that helps greatly in digging deeply into the operation of racial oppression in this society. What do I mean by "frame"? Several contemporary sciences, especially the cognitive, neurological, and social sciences, have made use of the idea of a perspectival frame that gets imbedded in individual minds (brains), as well as in collective memories and histories, and helps people make sense out of everyday situations. People have numerous frames for understanding and interpretation in their minds.

Cognitive and neurological scientists have used the concept of frame to examine human minds at work, with significant recent attention to how mostly unconscious frames shape individuals' socio-political inclinations and actions. Some social scientists, in contrast, have in recent years used the concept of frame to examine the relatively conscious frames of people in particular social movements. Their concern is with how framed messages aid in getting a particular social movement's members to protest. Other social scientists, especially media researchers, have accentuated how mass media framing of stories is typically quite conscious. Specific media frames select out limited aspects of an issue in order to make it salient for mass communication, a selectivity usually promoting a narrow reading of that issue. In all these disciplines a frame is form-giving and makes meaningful what otherwise might seem meaningless to the people involved. A particular frame structures the thinking process and shapes what people see, or do not see, in important societal settings.¹⁶

In examining racial oppression in the United States, I build on and extend these conceptions of societal framing and emphasize the central importance of a broad and long-dominant white racial frame. As I show in later chapters, much historical research demonstrates that there is in North America and elsewhere a dominant, white-created racial frame that provides an overarching and generally destructive worldview, one extending across white social divisions of class, gender, and age. Since its early development in the seventeenth century, this powerful frame has provided the vantage point from which white Americans have constantly viewed North American society. Its centrality in white minds is what makes it a dominant frame throughout the country and, indeed, much of the Western world. Over time, this powerful frame has been elaborated by, and/or imposed on, the minds of most Americans, becoming thereby the country's dominant "frame of mind" and "frame of reference" in regard to racial matters.

In this broad racial framing of society, white Americans have combined at least these important features:

1. racial stereotypes (a beliefs aspect);
2. racial narratives and interpretations (integrating cognitive aspects);

3. racial images (a visual aspect) and language accents (an auditory aspect);
4. racialized emotions (a "feelings" aspect); and
5. inclinations to discriminatory action.

Over its centuries of operation this strong racial framing has encompassed both a positive orientation to whites and whiteness and a negative orientation to those racial "others" who are exploited and oppressed. The dominant racial frame is negative and ethnocentric toward the racial others, yet it is much more than this. In the next chapter I show that early in this country's history this overarching racist framing assertively accentuated a very positive view of white superiority, virtue, and moral goodness. For centuries the white racial framing of ingroup superiority and outgroup inferiority has been, to use Antonio Gramsci's term, *hegemonic* in this society—that is, it has been part of a distinctive way of life that dominates all aspects of this society. For most whites, thus, the white racial frame is more than just one significant frame among many; it is one that has routinely defined a way of being, a broad perspective on life, and one that provides the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society.

Let us consider a recent racial event that illustrates several of these important dimensions of the white racial frame. In a journal kept for a college course, Trevor, a white student at a midwestern college, reported on an evening party with five other white male students:

When any two of us are together, no racial comments or jokes are ever made. However, with the full group membership present, anti-Semitic jokes abound, as do racial slurs and vastly derogatory statements. . . . Various jokes concerning stereotypes . . . were also swapped around the gaming table, everything from "How many Hebes fit in a VW beetle?" to "Why did the Jews wander the desert for forty years?" In each case, the punch lines were offensive, even though I'm not Jewish. The answers were "One million (in the ashtray) and four (in the seats)" and "because someone dropped a quarter," respectively. These jokes degraded into a rendition of the song "Yellow," which was re-done to represent the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. It contained lines about the shadows of the people being flash burned into the walls ("and it was all yellow" as the chorus goes in the song).

There is nothing subtle or ambiguous about these performances that frame and target specific groups. Trevor recorded yet more racist performances in this long evening event:

A member of the group also decided that he has the perfect idea for a Hallmark card. On the cover it would have a few kittens in a basket with ribbons and lace. On the inside it would simply say "You're a nigger." I found that incredibly offensive. Supposedly, when questioned about it, the idea of the card was to make it as offensive as humanly possible in order to make the maximal juxtaposition between warm- and ice- hearted. After a brief conversation about the cards which dealt with just how wrong they were, a small kitten was drawn on a piece of paper and handed to me with a simple, three-word message on the back. . . . Of course, no group is particularly safe from the group's scathing wit, and the people of Mexico were next to bear the brunt of the jokes. A comment was made about Mexicans driving low-riding cars so they can drive and pick lettuce at the same time. Comments were made about the influx of illegal aliens from Mexico and how fast they produce offspring.¹⁷

These white men are well-educated and having great "fun" as part of an extended social gathering, one they reportedly often engage in. Even in this relatively brief journal account we observe that the white racial frame involves a relatively broad framing of society, one that encompasses multiple dimensions. We observe an array of racial stereotypes and images, both explicitly and implicit, that mock, and signal the inferiority of, several groups of color. Even Jewish Americans are included, apparently as people who are not authentically white. Note too that there is more here than just cognitive stereotypes. The visual images are vivid, as is the song playing off the "yellow" metaphor. The performances are barbed, emotion-laden, and generally set in a joking format. We observe too that the white racial frame prizes whiteness, which is the obvious stance of superiority taken by these young whites doing the racialized performances. Old racially-framed notions and emotions that they have learned from previous generations have become the basis for extensive racist performances at times when these white friends gather to socialize.

Note too that the white racial frame structures events and performances, which in turn feed and add to the frame. Several different roles are played by the whites in this one racialized evening. There are the protagonists centrally acting out numerous racialized notions from important subframes within the white racial frame, here for an all-white audience. Others who are present agree with the racial performances and seem to act as cheerleading assistants. The recording student apparently acted either as a passive bystander or mild dissenter showing awareness of the moral issues here. No one, however, aggressively dissents and remonstrates strongly with the active protagonists.

In situations like this we see that the socially inherited racial frame is a comprehensive orienting structure, a "tool kit" that whites and others have long used to understand, interpret, and act in social settings. The important aspects of the frame listed above become taken-for-granted "common sense" for those who hold to them, and most holders use these tools in automatic or half-conscious ways.¹⁸ From the beginning of this country, this white frame has been deeply held and strongly resistant to displacement, and it includes many important "bits"—that is, frame elements such as the stereotyped racial knowledge, racial images and emotions, and racial interpretations in this diary account. These elements are important pieces of cultural information passed along from one person and group to the next. They include elementary elements such as the word-concepts "white," "black," "race," and white-created racist epithets like "nigger"—key words that in daily life regularly activate other elements of the frame. Frame elements are generally grouped into several key subframes within a broad overarching frame, and this broader frame operates as a gestalt, a unified whole that is in significant ways more than the sum of its parts.

At its highest level, this gestalt framing imbeds racist items that are relatively constant, while at lower levels it has changing connections to the ebb and flow of the data of everyday experience. This dominant frame does not exist apart from everyday experience, and racist practices flowing from it are essential parts of the larger system of racial oppression. Such practices are made meaningful to perpetrators by the dominant frame, and these practices show well the intersections of people's material, social, and mental lives.

Central to the dominant racial frame in the United States are several "big picture" narratives that connect frame elements into historically oriented stories with morals that are especially important to white Americans. These emotion-laden scenarios include stories about white conquest, superiority, hard work, and achievement. They make powerful use of stereotypes, images, and other elements from the overarching frame. They include numerous rags-to-riches narratives such as that for the early Pilgrims. According to this mythological narrative, these English "settlers" came with little, but drawing on a deep religious faith and much hard work they "settled" and made a nearly "vacant" land prosper, against the "savage" Indians. This heroic narrative was later extended as whites moved westward and concocted a "winning the West," manifest destiny myth. In that story white "settlers" again fought battles against "savage" Indians, with the heroes being rewarded with land and villainous Indians being killed off or isolated and punished on reservations. (The facts, such as the reality that the indigenous peoples were the successful and established settlers of these lands, are suppressed in these narratives.) Interestingly,

these fictional white narratives are still very much with us. Today, in their homes and in schools and the media a great many whites tell themselves and others false and fabricated narratives of how this country was created and founded. Perhaps most importantly, many try to live by the emotion-laden values and fiction-laden interpretations that they claim as meaningful from these common mythological narratives.¹⁹

It is clear from such narratives, as well as from the student diary account, that the old white racial framing of society is about much more than words. In addition to its many racial stereotypes and other such belief elements, this powerful racial frame includes deep emotions, visual images, language, and the everyday sounds of spoken language such as accents. Powerful emotions, deep negative feelings, about Americans of color frequently shape how most whites behave and interact, and in spite of the liberty-and-justice language they may periodically assert. Seen best when it structures behavior, the emotions of the conventional white frame have included racial hatred, racial arrogance, and a sense of racial superiority; greed and other emotions of gratification; and a desire for dominance over others. The emotions of white racism also include the fears and anxieties, conscious and unconscious, that whites have long held in regard to Americans of color because of the latter's resistance to white-imposed oppression. Moreover, for some whites guilt and shame have become central emotions, especially as the venality and immorality of racism have become more obvious to them. Significantly, those whites who do move to a substantial anti-racist framing of society and into significant anti-racist action often feel and accent the positive emotions of empathy, compassion, and hope for the future.

Operating Out of the White Frame

Although they live in several regions and often have different occupations and educations, most whites have revealed in numerous research studies that they hold broadly similar positive stereotypes, images, and understandings about whites and broadly similar negative stereotypes, images, and understandings of Americans of color.²⁰ Nonetheless, as I see it, the concept of the white racial frame is an "ideal type," a composite whole with a large array of elements that in everyday practice are drawn on *selectively* by white individuals acting to impose or maintain racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in everyday interactions. People use what they need from the overarching frame's major elements to deal with specific situations. Individual whites and others mostly do not make use of the bits of this dominant frame in exactly the same way. For most people there seems to be an internal hierarchy of racist ideas, images, and emotions, such that a given person may be more

comfortable with some of these elements, especially once they become conscious to the individual, than of other known frame elements. Indeed, racially liberal whites may reject certain elements of the traditional racist frame while unconsciously accepting or highlighting yet others. Moreover, over time some people may rework, challenge, or transform the version of the white frame they inherited.

The use of critical frame elements often varies by age, gender, class, and other major social variables. The strength and use of white power and privilege is variable across these subgroups, so the utilization of the framing to rationalize and act in societal situations also varies. In addition, the dominant racial frame regularly overlaps with, and is connected to, other collective frames that are important in viewing and interpreting recurring social worlds. Once a frame is utilized by a person, it often activates related frames or subframes. Indeed, quite frequently, the dominant racial frame activates and relates to class-oriented and patriarchal ways of looking at society. Indeed from the first century of European colonization, as we will see in the next chapters, the class and patriarchal (gender) frames of oppression have been linked to the white racial frame or even nested within it.

By constantly using selected bits of the dominant frame to understand and interpret society, by integrating new items into it, and by applying its stereotypes, images, and interpretations in their exploitative and discriminatory actions, whites have for centuries incorporated this interpretive frame in their minds as well as, to varying degrees, the minds of many people of color. Contemporary neurological research shows that strongly held views, such as those of the white frame, are deeply imbedded in the neuronal structure of human brains. Repetition is critical in this process. The dominant racial frame becomes implanted in the neural linkages of a typical brain by the process of constant repetition of its elements—which are heard, observed, or acted upon repeatedly by individuals over years and decades.²¹

Once inculcated in the mind and brain, this frame tends to be lasting and resistant to change. Activation of it tends to suppress alternative or countering frames. For most whites the dominant frame has become so fundamental that few are able to see it or think about it critically. When important but inconvenient facts are presented that do not fit this frame, whites tend to ignore or reject those facts. For example, for several centuries whites have held to very negative views of black Americans as not nearly as hard-working as white Americans, in spite of great historical evidence to the contrary. Frames as entrenched as the dominant white frame are hard to counter or uproot. In fact, the white racial frame has become part of most whites' *character structure*, a character structure habitually operated out of, with individual variations, in everyday life.

Moreover, from the beginning the white racial frame has not only

rationalized the exploitative structure of racial oppression, but also played a central role in *actually structuring* this society on a daily basis by providing important understandings, images, narratives, emotions, and operational norms that determine a great array of individual and group actions within all major societal sectors. The dominant white frame is active and directing; it is learned at parent's knee, in school, and from the media; and, once learned, it both guides and rationalizes discriminatory behavior. Whether it is a white child abusing a black child in the schoolyard, or a white adult discriminating against a Latino adult in a job situation, the frame is both activating and activated, and thus is central in creating the social texture of everyday life.

Frame interpretations do *not* somehow stand outside daily life just in the minds of individuals but directly shape the scripts that whites and others act on, such as in acts of discrimination in important social settings—thereby re-creating, maintaining, and reinforcing the racially stratified patterns and structures of society. For centuries, the white racial frame has directly protected and shaped this society's inegalitarian structure of resources and hierarchy of power. This dominant frame has persisted now over centuries only because it is constantly validating, and thus validated by, the inegalitarian accumulation of social, economic, and political resources.²²

Collective Memories and Collective Forgetting

Very important to the persistence of the white racial frame are friendship and kinship groups, for in such social networks the racial elements of that frame become common cultural currency. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs suggested that our personal understandings about society are not in some nook of our minds to which we alone have access. Instead, our social understandings, and thus our important frames, are regularly recalled to us externally, and the social groups of which we are part give us the “means to reconstruct them” if we “adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking.” An individual's understandings, images, knowledge, and framing hang together because they are part of the “totality of thoughts common to a group.”²³ Over time our groups, small and large, become major repositories of congealed group memories and associated social frames. We human beings gain most of our racial frame's understandings, images, and emotions from imbibing and testing those of parents and peers, the media, and written accounts handed down over generations. We do this learning mostly within significant networks of relatives, peers, and friends—as we saw in the example of white college students engaging in racist performances earlier in the chapter. Constant repetition and performance of the frame's racialized information and other bits—together with relevant

intonation and style, nonverbal gestures, and facial expressions—are essential to the successful reproduction of that frame across social networks, geography, and time.²⁴

Collective memory is central to these networks. How we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially on our knowledge of and interpretations of our racialized past. The collective memory of that racist past not only shapes, but legitimates, the established racial structure of today's society. Moreover, if major groups in society hold significantly different collective memories of that racist past, they will as a rule have difficulty in sharing understandings of racial experiences in the present. Most groups have important collective memories, but those with the greatest power, principally white Americans in the U.S. case, have the greatest control over society-wide institutional memories, including those recorded by the media and in most history books, organizational histories, laws, textbooks, films, and public monuments.²⁵

What the dominant racial framing ignores or suppresses is critical to the continuation of oppression. Collective *forgetting* is as important as collective remembering, especially in regard to the prevailing narratives of this country's developmental history. Historical events may stay in the collective records of memory, or they may be allowed to deteriorate, slowly or rapidly, through the overt choices of the powerful. The latter usually seek to suppress or weaken collective memories of societal oppression, and to construct positive and often fictional memories. White Americans and their acolytes in other groups have long tried to sanitize this country's collective memories and to downplay or eliminate accurate understandings of our racist history. Over nearly four centuries, as I detail in later chapters, a critical part of the dominant framing of whites' unjust enrichment at the expense of Americans of color—for example, killing off Native American populations and enslaving millions of Africans—has included much collective forgetting and mythmaking in regard to these bloody historical realities. Significant portions of North American histories of centuries of oppression have been allowed to disappear from public consciousness, or to be downplayed and mythologized in scattered societal portrayals.

This historical mythmaking has been absorbed even by those Americans who are not white, but who have incorporated in their minds significant elements of the dominant white framing. For example, Fareed Zakaria—an immigrant journalist who studied at Harvard with the influential nativistic scholar, Samuel Huntington, and works for a major U.S. news-magazine—has written recently about the historical rise and power of the West, yet with no significant references to the role of European-generated slavery and genocide in that process. He writes like many contemporary white historians: “Contact with the rest of the world stimulated

Europe. . . . Everywhere Europeans went they found goods, markets, and opportunities. By the seventeenth century, Western nations were increasing their influence over every region and culture with which they came in contact." Indeed, most areas of the world became "marked for use by Europeans."²⁶ In a substantial discussion of these historical issues Zakaria makes only one fleeting reference to the enslavement of Africans and has no explicit reference to the genocide directed at indigenous peoples. For him, as for most historians of the United States and the West, modernization is about industrialization, urbanization, education, and wealth, and not centrally about genocide, slavery, and the unjust enrichment of European colonists and countries.

When such a momentous and bloody past is suppressed, downplayed, or mythologized by elites and historians, ordinary Americans, especially whites, understandably have difficulty in seeing or assessing accurately the present-day realities of unjust enrichment and impoverishment along racial lines. Moreover, misunderstandings and myths of our highly oppressive past are frequently passed along from one generation to the next, and from one person to the next, by means of recurring and ritualized performances. Commemorative ceremonies on holidays, such as July 4th or Columbus day, honoring our history celebrate and sanitize a horrific past, thereby shaping contemporary communal memories by accenting the continuity of the present racial status quo with a positively portrayed racial past. Sharing elements of the white racial frame in such ceremonies generally promotes solidarity in the dominant group, and often with other racial groups that accept white dominance.²⁷

The Importance of Counter-Frames

While the central concern of this book is developing the concept of the white racial frame and showing how it has developed and operated across the centuries, we also need to realize and accent the point that this is not the only important collective frame directed at racial matters. Most people carry several perspectival frames applicable to particular situations in their heads at the same time. We might call such people "multiconceptuals" or, even better, "multiframers." In examining the significant and sometimes contested history of the dominant white racial frame, I will deal to some degree with three other important categories of frames in everyday operation: (1) a white-crafted liberty-and-justice frame; (2) the anti-oppression counter-frames of Americans of color; and (3) the home-culture frames that Americans of color have drawn on in developing their counter-frames.

One of the great ironies of this country's early history is that white

Americans' conceptions of their freedom and of social justice were honed within a slavery system. By the mid- to late eighteenth century, the white colonists had developed what I call the white "liberty-and-justice frame," one that they loudly proclaimed against British officials who were suppressing their liberties. This liberty-and-justice frame is important because most white Americans have in the past and in the present articulated some version of this framing. We see the importance of this framing in the founding documents of the United States, including the "establish justice" and "secure the blessings of liberty" language of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

Since the American revolution most whites have held in their minds some version of a liberty-and-justice frame, one that is real to them, but one that is usually treated as rhetorical or hypothetical when it comes to serious threats to the perpetuation of the U.S. system of racism. The liberty-and-justice frame has been routinely trumped by the white racial frame, and has too often been reserved just for rhetorical speeches and sermons. Still, over the centuries of this country's existence, modest numbers of whites have taken the liberty-and-justice frame very seriously in regard to the racially oppressed situations of Americans of color. We see this in the white abolitionists who, with black abolitionists, protested and fought to bring down the slavery system. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s we again see a small group of whites actively allying themselves with black civil rights protestors, whose efforts played a major role in bringing down legal segregation.

In addition to the dominant white racial frame and the white version of the liberty-and-justice frame, there are two groups of perspectival frames that are highly relevant to understanding resistance to systemic racial oppression in North America over the centuries: (1) the anti-oppression counter-frames of Americans of color, and (2) the home-culture frames that Americans of color have drawn on to develop effective anti-oppression counter-frames. In opposing the dominant racial frame, Americans of color have frequently developed a significant counter-frame, an important frame that has helped them to better understand and resist oppression. Freedom-oriented resistance frames appear in the earliest period of racial oppression. The early counter-frames of Americans of color, primarily those of Native Americans and African Americans, were initially developed for survival purposes, and over time they have added critical elements that have strengthened the understandings of racism and the strategies of everyday resistance.

The resistance frames have often drawn heavily on material from the cultural backgrounds of those oppressed. For example, since the first century of their enslavement, African Americans have maintained a

home-culture that is a hybrid, with cultural features stemming in part from the African cultural background and in part from their experiences in North America. Confronted daily by extreme oppression and white attempts to eradicate their African cultures, the many African groups among those enslaved became a single African American people with a home-culture that drew substantially on family, spiritual, and moral elements from their African backgrounds. With strong African roots, these new Americans shaped their religion, art, music, and strategies against oppression and for social justice.

The resistance counter-frames of Americans of color have also drawn on the ideals or terminology from whites' own liberty-and-justice frame. Indeed, since the early decades of slavery and genocide whites have greatly feared that African Americans and Native Americans would operate out of a liberty-and-justice counter-frame of their own. Thus, whites feared its influence and use in African Americans' revolts against slavery, and such fears even accelerated with the end of slavery—fears that played some role in the emergence and structure of the near-slavery of Jim Crow segregation. Today, as we will see in later chapters, white Americans still fear, and attack, the stronger counter-frames as they are used by many Americans of color. One example of such white fear can be seen in the widespread, fierce, and irrational white reactions during the November 2008 election to the strong anti-racist perspective articulated by Dr. Jeremiah Wright, who at the time had been President Barack Obama's pastor for several decades.

In Chapter 7, thus, I examine Dr. Wright's critical perspective on U.S. history as an example of a contemporary counter-frame arising out of the black tradition and black communities. I will also explore briefly other important counter-frames, including those of Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Historically and in the present, these counter-frames have regularly provided valuable tool kits for oppressed Americans, offering both individual and collective tools for countering widespread white hostility and discrimination.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have defined and detailed the concept of the white racial frame and suggested its utility and importance in making sense out of racial oppression, mainly in North America. In the next few chapters I examine several questions about how this dominant racial frame and its important elements arose over the centuries, and why they did so. I also ask, how has this frame shaped the past and present structure of this society? In these chapters I seek to answer these and related questions, and thus to make the often hidden racist realities of this country more

obvious—to take them “out of the closet” so that they can be openly analyzed and, hopefully, redressed or removed.

For centuries, to the present day, the dominant racial frame has sharply defined inferior and superior racial groups and authoritatively rationalized and structured the great racial inequalities of this society. In a white-washing process, and most especially today, this dominant framing has shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental numerous racial issues, including the realities of persisting racial discrimination and racial inequality. By critically analyzing this dominant racial frame's elements and its numerous structuring impacts, we can discern more clearly how this country is put together racially—and perhaps how it might be able to change in the direction of the liberty-and-justice society long proclaimed in this country's still-dominant political rhetoric.