

# From Jim Crow to racial hegemony: Evolving explanations of racial hierarchy

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## Abstract

In recent years, scholars have worked to understand the persistence of racial inequality in societies characterized by the condemnation of explicit racism, growing diversity, and anti-discrimination policies. Many theorists generally agree about the multiple dimensions of racism and challenge assertions about the incipient colourblindness of the current context. However, they also disagree about the nature of the racial hierarchy in the USA. One approach continues to emphasize a bipolar model, with blacks at the bottom and whites on top, as sufficient to explain diverse patterns of inequality. An alternative formulation sees racialization as contextual, yielding a less stable and more complex ranking system. This article summarizes both positions and concludes that while the bipolar model continues to present useful insights, a more nuanced understanding of racial inequality is achieved when the bipolar approach is replaced by one that comprehends the multiple and even contradictory nature of racial disadvantage and racial inequality in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** Race; racial inequality; black-white model; globalization; ethnic; racial conflict.

The analysis of racial inequality is among the most long-standing and productive projects in social science. Theories and data concerning racism have challenged oppressive stereotypes, demonstrated that the fate of racialized groups is the consequence of broader social processes rather than group members' own flaws, and advanced the cause of more inclusive and egalitarian social arrangements. However, in recent years, established models for understanding the relationship between social categories and collective disadvantage have been challenged as

they are applied to societies characterized by increasingly complex patterns of stratification, identification and inequality.

Extensive evidence demonstrates that racial classification continues to be an important basis of invidious treatment, limited economic opportunity and social exclusion (Hacker 1992; Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2002). However, in societies marked by social and economic transformations, policies addressing discrimination, immigration-based enhancements of diversity, and extra-national bases of identification and solidarity, research indicates that race alone is insufficient to understand many aspects of social inequality. Groups sharing common racial characteristics have been shown to have markedly different social and economic fates and dissimilar access to social goods, ranging from income, health care, employment, and public safety, to stable families, housing, and educational opportunities (Wilson 1987; Massey 1993; Hutchinson 1994; Anderson 1999; Waters 1999; Hochschild 2000). At the same time, comparative research reveals that groups with disparate phenotypes, histories, contexts and origins sometimes encounter remarkably similar patterns of oppression (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Winant 2001; Kivisto 2002).

Such differential outcomes are generally attributed to the unequal and changing patterns of allocation of resources in accordance with non-racial characteristics, like nationality, religion, language, gender, class, sexuality, family status, age and citizenship. This reduces the centrality of race *per se* in accounting for social position. Finally, given the growing influence of globalization, diasporic identities and border-crossing social movements, existing models of racial inequality that may have offered an adequate explanation of social patterns within specific regions or nation-states come up wanting as they confront understandings of identity, inequality and membership drawn from dramatically different social settings (Waters 1999; Winant 2001).

Efforts to define the origins of racial inequalities are often controversial because they have political implications. Groups posit racial hierarchies in an attempt to acquire more financial, political and moral resources for themselves, to delegitimize the claims of their opponents, and while engaging in negotiations with potential allies. Within the USA, the debate occurs at a time when some groups' – native born blacks and whites – demographic influence is waning, while Asians, Latinos and other racial/ethnic groups like Arabs are becoming more numerous, visible and influential.

Definitions of racial hierarchy are of vital importance and not simply matters of arcane academic concern. 'If racism is defined as politically or morally unacceptable, there must be a reasonable consensus about what it is' (Miles and Brown 2003, p. 3). As Linda Carty (1992, p. 13) insists, understanding the nature of oppression is vital to resisting it. When various opponents of racial oppression are

unable to agree, then their ability to create anti-racist coalitions is significantly undermined (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Espiritu 2004). While most of the discussion that follows concerns various models of racial inequality in American society, I sporadically consider the applicability of these formulations to patterns of racial/ethnic inequality that exist internationally.

### **The black-white model**

In view of recent challenges to our understanding of racial inequality, this article explores the current viability of the most influential approach to racial hierarchy: the black-white or bipolar model. No single formulation of this model exists. Yet such a classification is evinced in a considerable body of research and theorizing (Winant 2001). The black-white model offers an explanation for patterns of racial/ethnic inequality and suggests a vertical location of racialized groups within a system of stratification. However, as new groups enter societies undergoing processes of social and economic transformation, and scholars and activists debate the validity of existing explanations, formulations about the origins and effects of racism are made problematic. As a consequence, it has become difficult to describe racial inequalities in a manner that is widely accepted, even among those who agree that racism is a fundamental source of social inequality.

Now that explicit assertions of racial antipathy are unacceptable in the public arena, scholars have engaged in wide-ranging efforts to understand the continued influence of race on blocked mobility and the enduring subjugation of populations of colour (Wellman 1977; Bonilla-Silva 2003a). After decades of debate regarding the underlying engine of racial inequality, there is a general consensus that racism in the USA is largely the result of white supremacy, and involves multiple, rather than singular, sources that exist in the realms of culture, economics, psychology and history. For example, earlier assertions that racism should be understood solely as the consequence of irrational psychological prejudice, or purely as an outcome of capitalist exploitation, have been refuted (Wellman 1977; Cornell and Hartmann 1998). Yet, the role of prejudice and economic exploitation have not been fully rejected, either. Instead, each is now seen as one of the many forces contributing to, shaping, and shaped by, a multi-faceted and evolving process of racialization.

Race is seen as a social construction, but one that has very real implications in shaping life chances and the distribution and denial of privileges to individuals and groups. Debates about the role of phenotype in racialization continue to simmer. However, while acknowledging exceptions, many scholars maintain that those with

European origins still enjoy more privileges than those without them (Winant 2001). Like other social constructions, race is unstable. Yet it has a 'changing same' quality at its core (Bonilla-Silva 2003a, p. 9).

Such Theorists of racial inequality generally acknowledge that oppressed groups possess a measure of agency. As a consequence, they admit that some members are able to improve their quality of life, education and income. The fact that minority groups include members who can maintain a middle-class existence does not mean, however, that they are free from racial oppression (even though advocates of colourblindness may make such an argument). Rather, scholars often credit improvements in living standards to hard-fought activism and successful struggle rather than the declining significance of race. To quote Derrick Bell (1992, p. 10): 'In this last decade of the twentieth century, colour determines the social and economic status of all African Americans, both those highly successful and their poverty bound brethren whose lives are grounded in misery and despair. . . the fact is that, despite what we designate as progress wrought through struggle over many generations, we remain what we were in the beginning: a dark and foreign presence, always the designated "other"'.

While there exists a general consensus regarding the basic dynamics of racial oppression, there is less agreement about the impact of racism on the full range of non-European populations that, in recent years, have grown in numbers, visibility and self-expression in many Western nations. Demonstrating on-going efforts to come to terms with recent transformations in American society, two of the most innovative theorists of racism in the post civil-rights era – Howard Winant (2000) and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001) – insist that racism has multiple bases, and that it impacts various groups in a system that changes over time. 'Because races are socially constructed, both the meaning and the position assigned to races in the social structure are always contested. Who is to be black or white or Indian reflects and affects the social, political, ideological and economic struggles among the races' (Bonilla-Silva 2001, p. 41). Both of these writers carefully refer to 'blacks and other minorities' (Bonilla-Silva 2001, p. 11) or 'racially defined minority groups' (Winant: 2000, p. 22) in order to ensure that their writings apply to multiple populations and situations. Winant (2000, p. 21) concludes that the phenomenon of racism defies easy specification: 'Although we are pretty sure that racism continues to exist, indeed flourish, we are less than certain about what it means today'.

Despite the general acceptance of its complexity, scholars continue to debate the best way to understand the nature and essence of racial inequality. One line of reasoning contends that a black-white model of racial inequality continues to be the most relevant paradigm for

understanding American (and even global) racism, even when many racialized groups are neither black nor white. Joe Feagin and Andrew Hacker are among the leading proponents of such a black-white model. Feagin emphasizes the continued impact of anti-black racism in the United States, and sees the black-white model as fundamental to understanding the oppression of other non-European groups, which he argues, is a direct outcome of white supremacy and the various institutions and practices initially developed to dominate blacks. Hacker (1992, pp. 5,16) concurs, asserting that race in America really refers to differences between blacks and whites, and that other groups are immune to the ‘presumptions of inferiority associated with Africa and slavery’.

### **Emphasizing the racial oppression of African Americans**

Scholars who claim that African Americans are the group most racially disadvantaged in the USA, assert that greater numbers of blacks have been affected by racial oppression than other groups, that this has occurred for a longer time, and that blacks’ oppression has been more extensively justified and delineated within the legal system than has been the case for other groups. They further contend that whites applied more effort in developing and enforcing anti-black racism than they did in rationalizing the domination of other minority populations (see Feagin 2000). Although it is recognized that other groups have also been treated badly – even possibly worse, in the case of Native Americans, who were subjected to genocide – it was blacks who were central to the internal racial reality of colonial American life and whose exploited labour was so vital to national economic development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Feagin 2000, p. 207).

As a consequence, Feagin contends that anti-black racism has served as the foundation for the racial oppression of other peoples of colour:

White-on-black oppression is much more than a “black-white paradigm”, conceptual framework, media emphasis or dialogue about race... US society is not a multiplicity of disconnected racisms directed at people of colour... white elites and the white public have long evaluated, reacted to, and dominated later non-European entrants coming into the nation from within a previously established and highly imbedded system of antiblack racism. (Feagin 2000, pp. 204–05).

A considerable body of recent scholarship on whiteness argues that a wide range of national and ethnic populations now accepted as white

were initially racialized when they first entered the US as immigrants (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). However, it was European origin groups who were able to improve their social standing and access to privileges in US society by adopting the social, economic and ideological practices of the white majority while simultaneously separating themselves from and denigrating blacks (Scarpaci 1972; Roediger 1991; Jacobson 1998; Gerstle 2001). Some evidence suggests that Asians and light-skinned Latinos are currently making progress in that direction (Lee and Bean 2003). However, few if any African origin people have achieved whiteness in American society.

Acknowledging that other groups also encounter discrimination, adherents of the black-white model see recent immigrants as exercising race privilege to demonize and exploit African-Americans, while simultaneously using the very structures and ideologies that African-Americans struggled for decades to create in order to promote their own mobility (Hacker 1992; Camarillo 2004). This option is less available to immigrants who appear black. As Kasinitz (1992), Stepick (1998) and Waters (1999) note, Caribbean immigrants who make special efforts to distinguish themselves from American blacks are unable to escape the kinds of racist treatment that is commonly encountered by native-born African Americans.

In addition to such historical evidence, those who proclaim that blacks have suffered the most oppression in the US find evidence in a wide array of contemporary measures of group well being. Despite blacks' long residence in the country, near universal possession of US citizenship, fluency in the English language and mastery of American cultural practices, higher levels of education than many migrant populations, and the considerable social and economic achievements of the black middle class, as a group, blacks have lower earnings, less wealth, lower rates of self employment, greater segregation, lower life expectancy, greater likelihood of incarceration, lower rates of inter-marriage and a variety of other social disadvantages, than other racially defined populations (Hacker 1992; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Feagin 2000; Lee and Bean ND; 2003).

Advocates of the black - white model emphasize the shared forms of discrimination – economic, legal and otherwise – that blacks, as a group, encounter. The impacts of these are not limited to members of the 'urban underclass', whose dire condition can be explained away as the consequence of several unfortunate structural factors (Wilson 1987). Rather, the affects of racism can and do impact upon all black Americans. In the conclusion of a recent study on the changing nature of US racial categories, Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean (ND: 26) argue that despite the recently increased racial diversity of American society, 'Latinos and Asians may have the option to become almost white or even white . . . Hence, America's changing colour line seems to point to

a new racial/ethnic divide that consigns many blacks to disadvantaged positions that are not qualitatively different from those perpetuated by the traditional black-white divide'.

### **Criticisms of the black-white model**

While acknowledging the persistence of racism in American society, another set of scholars argue that by emphasizing the black-white model of racial inequality, we limit our comprehension of the ways in which race impacts upon groups who are neither white nor black. Their position argues that the emphasis on white-black race relations prevents a full understanding of the forms of racism experienced by groups such as Asian-Americans, Latinos, Arabs, and American Indians, whose racialization is associated with factors such as religion, foreignness, clothing, culture, citizenship, gender and language – issues that are not addressed by the literature on black-white racism (Almaguer 1994; Sethi 1994; Lee 2003).

In the understanding of such critics, scholars who follow the black-white model remain intellectually stuck in the social reality of the early twentieth century and the geography of the Eastern US, rather than being prepared to face the current situation, which involves many more groups, and which is far more complex, shaped by the global exchange of ideologies, resources, technologies, identities and populations (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2003b).

Many of the most volatile and well-publicized incidents of racial/ethnic conflict and violence that have occurred in the US over the last two decades – the Miami Riot of 1980, boycotts of Korean grocers in New York, the Crown Heights Riot, the 1992 Los Angeles Riot, disputes between Arab and Chaldean business owners and black customers in Detroit, and ongoing antagonism over government jobs and political power between blacks and Latinos in many locations – have transpired among non-white immigrant and minority groups (Porter and Dunn 1984; Min 1996; Waldinger 1996; Yoon 1997; David 2000).

The 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, which has been described as the U.S.'s first multi-ethnic riot, provoked a great deal of reflection on the nature of American racism because of the involvement of numerous ethnic, racial and nationality groups – a complex dynamic which is not easily explained by the black-white model. For example, the largest number of those arrested (many to be deported) were Latinos, not blacks. Most of the businesses that were looted and burned were not owned by whites, but by non-whites, especially Korean-Americans and Latinos. Finally, prominent local officials, such as the mayor of Los Angeles, as well as many leading politicians representing the involved

regions, were not whites, but African Americans (Johnson *et al.* 1992; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999).

The mere existence of conflict among peoples of colour does not prove the invalidity of the black-white model of racism (Lee 2002; Lie 2004). However, a coterie of scholars has found fault with the black-white model because of its inability to describe the experience of other, non-European groups. For example, Rita Chaudry Sethi (1994, pp. 235–36) contends that, ‘U.S. discourse on racism is generally framed in these simplistic terms: the stark polarity of black-white conflict. As it is propagated, it embraces none of the true complexities of racist behavior... Whites would deny us our right to speak out against majority prejudice... other people of colour would deny us the same because of monopolistic sentiments that they alone endure real racism’.

Admitting that blacks themselves continue to be oppressed, Elaine Kim (1994, p. 87) nevertheless asserts, ‘African Americans are more politically empowered than Asians or Latinos because they have been here the longest, and the civil rights movement legacy has allowed them to participate more meaningfully than other minorities’. She further asserts that African-Americans are unwilling to share their power by admitting that other minority groups are also victimized, in some cases, by blacks. Speaking of the 1992 LA Riot, she alleges, ‘A few African-American leaders still refuse to acknowledge that Korean stores were even targeted’.

While African American organizations are described as unresponsive to Asians’ oppression, Kim ultimately blames established Asian-American groups for imposing definitions of inequality emphasized in the black-white model that do not incorporate the experience of the recently arrived.

Recent immigrants’ experiences with anti-Asian violence is black and brown... Asian American organizations that refuse to consider the possibility of non-white anti-Asian violence keep us trapped in old black-white paradigm of race relations, which some African American community leaders cling to, to avoid losing ground to Asians and Latinos. (Kim 1994, p. 87).

Various writers also insist that the black-white formulation cannot adequately apprehend the experience of Latinos. A variety of studies indicate that Latino immigrants see African Americans along with whites as native-born power-holders – black Anglo Saxons – with whom they must compete for employment (especially in desirable government jobs), housing, government services and neighbourhood control (Porter and Dunn 1984; Waldinger 1996; Murguia and Forman 2003, p. 73; Camarillo 2004). In an article examining the



construction of Mexican identity in the US, Niemann, Romero, Arredondo and Rodriguez (1999) found that along with other factors, conflicts with Chicanos and African Americans were vital in making Mexican immigrants aware of their own racial, ethnic and nationality status in the United States. Similarly, in a study of Latinos' involvement in the 1992 LA Uprising, Hayes-Bautista, Schink and Hayes-Bautista (1993, p. 446) argue that despite their high arrest rates, Latinos did not share blacks' views of the event. 'By and large (Latinos) were not protesting the Rodney King verdict in a solidaristic, expressive fashion.' Indeed, during the early phases of the riot 'many, if not most, of the victims of attacks on automobiles were Latinos'. Moreover, Latinos owned a significant fraction – about 40 per cent – of burned businesses (Hayes-Bautista, Schink and Hayes-Bautista 1993, pp. 441,446; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999, p. 26).

Drawing from his research on both black and Latino poverty, Douglas Massey (1993, p. 453) decries the poor fit between the black-white model and the conditions surrounding Latinos in the US. He contends that 'Hispanics differ from blacks in five essential ways that render standard methods and theories inappropriate for studying Latino' disadvantage. In Massey's formulation, American blacks are a unified group with a common identity. Latinos, in contrast, are characterized by differences in appearance, race, nationality, language, culture and citizenship. One can generalize very little about them as a group. Further, while Massey sees blacks as sharing a common race that is understood by all, Latinos come from countries with differing definitions of race. Once in the US, darker-skinned Latinos are subject to greater racism and segregation, while light-skinned Latinos experience less colour-based prejudice and discrimination. Race thus fragments, rather than bonds, the diverse group known as Latinos.

Migrant status further distinguishes the experience of blacks and Latinos. While few blacks are immigrants, many Latinos are. The make-up of an immigrant population in a given settlement is the consequence of various processes of selection. Accordingly, migrant groups generally reveal skewed social, economic and demographic characteristics. Some Latino populations, such as first-wave Cubans, are highly educated, urban in origin, politically conservative and relatively old (Portes and Bach 1985). Other groups, such as Mexicans, are younger, less educated, politically moderate and from small towns (Ortiz 1996). Disadvantages and advantages of Latino populations may thus be imported from the country of origin rather than produced in the US, and as such, may not reflect US-based social conditions and policies. Moreover, since migrants often engage in return migration, Latinos might export some of their unemployment, making their population appear relatively successful, when in reality, those confronting obstacles exit. Thus, the nexus of oppression that can be said

to impact nearly all blacks in the US in similar ways affects various Latino populations in very different ways.

Those investigating Arab Americans' racialization also decry the limitations inherent in the black-white model. Therese Saliba argues that (1999, pp. 305–06) 'Arabs and Arab Americans remain victims of racist policies, even as they are rendered invisible by the standards of current racialized discourses... In the struggle for equality and representation, Arab Americans have undoubtedly lagged behind other recognized "minority" groups, in part because we defy the categories that constitute minority status, but also because Arab Americans have strategically embraced "whiteness" to gain access to privileges conferred by the dominant society'. Saliba (1999, p. 316) further asserts that Arabs' racial status remains unclear to various American groups and to Arab Americans themselves, making analysis of their situation near impossible. 'Arabs are labeled Caucasian, Asian, Afro-Asian, non-European, Semitic, Arab, black, or 'of color' as racialized formulation shift with political struggles'. Joseph (1999) and Sethi (1994) assert that Islam – the religious affiliation of most Arab migrants to the US since the 1960s – has been racialized as a Third World faith while Christianity is associated with whiteness. This religious dimension of racialization is not addressed by the black-white model.

### **The problematic position of intermediary groups**

An additional problem with bipolar models of racial hierarchy is that they are poorly equipped for understanding the ambiguous, intermediate status of groups that are defined as neither black nor white, such as Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans. Various authors propose the location of a potential colour line that would include such intermediate groups either with whites (as a consequence of their attempts to secure more privileges) or blacks (due to their shared confrontations with white racism) (Lee and Bean 2003; Murguía and Forman 2003; Ogbu 1978). However, the insertion of intermediate groups into a clear, top-down racial hierarchy is problematic, given the "complex interstices of privilege and disadvantage among ethnic minority groups" (Song 2003, p. 122).

For example, while Asians and Latinos generally have higher rates of intermarriage and lower rates of residential segregation with whites than do African Americans, they also have less political power, are more often subject to having their patriotism and citizenship questioned by legal authorities, more vulnerable to being ejected from the country, and more ridiculed in the mainstream culture and media (Song 2003). Murguía and Forman (2003) demonstrate Mexican immigrants' ambiguous relationship to the bimodal racial

system of the US. They note that Mexicans are involved in patterns of conflict *and* affiliation with whites and blacks. Moreover, due to cultural and status-related reasons, Mexicans feel considerable social distance from both black and white Americans.

Another aspect of racial disadvantage which is often overlooked in a bipolar, black-white model, is xenophobia. Drawing from her analysis of conflicts between black customers and Korean entrepreneurs, Claire Jean Kim (2000) argues that racism involves not one but *two* dimensions – being seen as superior/inferior and as an insider/outsider. Accordingly, Koreans and other Asians are racially triangulated between blacks and whites in a way that pits native-born blacks and racialized immigrants against one another and conceals the role of the white power structure (see also Lawrence, 1995, cited in Feagin 2000, p. 230). Erika Lee (2003) applies a similar argument in her study of Chinese exclusion and its enduring impact. She contends that the historical treatment of Chinese immigrants reveals a neglected strand in the development of American racism that continues to be manifested in the exclusion and deportation of ‘unassimilable’ immigrants.

In contrast to the black-white model that used Jim Crow to keep blacks ‘in their place’ inside American society, the Chinese were racialized as the polar opposite of “Americans”. Immigration restrictions and deportations (including those imposed since 9-11-2001) were first developed to keep the Chinese at bay. Later, these were applied to Southern and East Europeans and Mexicans but never to African Americans (E. Lee 2003, p. 31). Consequently, during certain periods on the Pacific Coast, even though the Chinese were likened to blacks as racial others, ‘whiteness was defined most clearly in opposition to Asian-ness or “yellowness”’. In this way, Erika Lee provides historical evidence for what we might refer to as an ‘Asian/white’ model of racialization in American society (Almaguer 1994; E. Lee 2003, p. 31). ‘[B]y defining “Chinese-ness” . . . the exclusion laws and their enforcement helped to forge not only Chinese American identities, but also the concepts of race, class, gender, sexuality and citizenship for Americans in general’.

### **Understanding global racism**

If there is a growing chorus against the viability and legitimacy of the black-white model of racism within the US, a considerable body of literature suggests even greater problems with the application of this model internationally. The growth of globalization, and the increase of international migration and of diasporic communities, means that groups within specific national locations are increasingly influenced by depictions of race, status and group membership that are not fixed in

geographic space. The study of inequality beyond the United States reveals many instances where race is defined and treated in a manner at odds with North American models. Cases such as those of the Burakumin and Koreans in Japan, lower caste communities in India, Jews and Gypsies in Europe, and numerous conflicts in Angola, Burundi, Uganda, Congo, Sudan and Mauritania demonstrate that groups can be racialized and severely oppressed without being of significantly darker-skin colour than their more privileged counterparts (De Vos and Wagatsuma 1966; Marger 2000; Winant 2001, p. 9). In order to achieve political and economic ends, and in response to human rights movements, various nation-states have recently extended significant opportunities to certain racialized refugee, immigrant and minority groups that would have been inconceivable only decades ago (Gold 2000). Faced with this sort of contradictory evidence about the broader trajectory of racialization, Miles and Brown (2003, p. 78) assert, 'Clearly, a concept of racism that is formulated by reference to a single historical example (the United States) and then applied uncritically to another... has a degree of specificity that seriously limits its analytic scope'.

The difficulty involved in promoting an inclusive understanding of racial hierarchy was confronted during the United Nations 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Despite the good intentions of conference planners, the event was criticized as contributing little to a universal condemnation of racial oppression. Instead, it involved efforts by participants to discredit their opponents, while avoiding culpability for their own potentially racist actions. For example, the US and Israel boycotted the event altogether to escape attempts to define Zionism as racism (Elliot 2001). European nations offered weak apologies for their record of slave holding, but carefully avoided making any statements that might require their payment of reparations (Banton 2002). Meanwhile, India worked hard to exclude the topic of caste discrimination, China sought to avoid assertions that its rule of Tibet was racist, several European nations tried to elude the discussion of their oppressive treatment of the Roma, and African nations 'willfully ignored the continuation of slavery on their continent to the present day' (Elliot 2001; Mason 2001).

Because of challenges such as these, analysts seeking to conceptualize patterns of inequality on a global scale generally see colour-based racism as only one of many orders of oppression. For example, in their attempts to understand social hierarchies, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (1999, p. 38) note that racism is an important basis of oppression in some, but not all societies. Rather than fixing on any single source of disadvantage, they summarize an array of 'arbitrary-set systems' that permit them to analyse the foundations upon which

inequality is based in many settings. In a like manner, Peter Kivisto (2002, p. 18) suggests that race might be most profitably approached as a sub-category of the more universal concept of ethnicity.

Not all scholars, however, see the black-white model as limited to the US. Joe Feagin (2000, p. 16), asserts that as a consequence of European imperialism and colonialism, a global racial order was established and continues to impact societies today (see also Bonilla-Silva 2001, p. 197). Its influence, in conjunction with the economic power of the West, limits the ability of even post-colonial African countries to cast off the influence of white racism. In fact, Bhattacharyya *et al.* (2002, p. 8) assert that globalization's power to remake the world economy and the concomitant patterns of migration, dislocation and resistance have enhanced both the West's interactions with and paranoia about the Third World, thus increasing racialized conflicts.

However, in both the US, and especially abroad, some scholars and activists contend that the black-white model cannot incorporate the specific forms of racialization that transpire in both affluent and developing societies. Given this combination of strengths and limitations, it might be most productive to modify, rather than either retain or reject, current formulations of the black-white model. There is sound precedent for making such modifications: The model has already been strengthened by transformations that permit it to address the influence of gender, class and sexuality (see Baca Zinn and Thornton-Dill 1996; Hochschild 2000; Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2002). Since both societies in general and processes of racialization are in constant flux, there is good reason to avoid committing ourselves to static formulations of social phenomena, racial or otherwise (Winant 2000).

In his aptly entitled *The World is a Ghetto* (2001), Howard Winant offers an exemplar of this sort of integration as he works to understand racism in a variety of national settings such as Brazil, South Africa and Europe, where the black-white model cannot be directly applied. Having engaged in this broadly comparative analysis, the author concludes that inequalities are maintained through a system of racial hegemony that defies easy categorization and tolerates certain advances by racialized people and, yet at the same time, produces outcomes that are not so different from long-standing patterns of inequality.

## **Conclusions**

The proponents of a black-white model of racial inequality contend that it offers a means of understanding racial inequality and racial hierarchy in societies marked by increasing diversity. In response, its

critics assert that the bipolar approach is limited in its ability to apprehend the full array and complexity of diverse, racialized groups in multi-ethnic societies. For some, this lack of theoretical sophistication and precision is great enough to justify the abandonment of a predominantly black-white model of hierarchy.

While it is important to attend to the details of local context and to the unique aspects of particular groups' experiences, the purpose of social theorizing is to develop broader generalizations that can inform a wide array of cases. If one grants sufficient attention to the specifics of each instance of racial oppression, he or she will almost always uncover enough details to contradict the assertions of general theories. However, if we abandon broader concepts, we will deny ourselves the kinds of insights that comprehensive generalizations can produce (Marcus 1986). Moreover, in so doing, we may inadvertently commit ourselves to employing micro-level analyses associated with psychology and neo-classical economics. This is not only intellectually limiting, but is also likely to reify the conservative political frameworks that resonate with individualistic models of social action in general, and colourblind theories that deny the continuing effects of racism in particular (Mills 1959; Bellah *et al.* 1985; Ritzer 1988; Burawoy *et al.* 1991; Gitlin 1994; Bonilla-Silva 2003a).

In conclusion, given the limitations of a black-white model of racial hierarchy, we need a more nuanced and complex understanding of racial oppression and privilege. One important advantage of a more inclusive understanding of racial disadvantage is its appeal to disparate constituencies. For if inter-ethnic alliances and viable anti-racist movements are to be developed, then understandings of oppression that are sensitive to and representative of various racialized groups are needed. Otherwise, those with vested interests in maintaining current patterns of racial oppression and the dissemination of colourblind ideologies may capitalize on the divisions and interethnic tensions among minority groups.

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