

**Lecture 8**  
**Sociology 298**  
**Class and Race**

**March 13, 2002**

## **I. A Class Analysis of Racial Oppression**

### **1. Two Questions**

In thinking about racial oppressions and their link to class structure, the important question to ask is less: “What are the origins of racial inequality?” but rather, “What explains the durability of racial divisions and the difficulty in eliminating racial inequality?” This question, in turn, has two dimensions of answers:

- 1) what are the processes which actively reproduce racial cleavage?
- 2) what are the processes that block challenges to eliminating racial cleavages?

The first of these concerns various mechanisms which actively reinforce or reproduce racial inequality. This would include propaganda, stereotyping in the media, direct legal discriminations, informal discriminatory practices and norms, and so on. The second concerns the mechanisms that undermine attempts to mobilize against racial inequality. This may involve the same processes involved in active reproduction, but it may also involve more indirect processes.

The central claim of class analysis is that the interactions of class and race help to answer both of these questions. This does not mean that class and class alone is sufficient to explain the durability of racial inequality and oppression, but that it is one of the central processes involved.

### *2. Who Benefits from Racism*

A useful way of approaching these questions is to begin by asking what seems like a simple question, and then seeing what make this question more complex (and more interesting). The simple-sounding question is this? *Who benefits from racial inequality?* Let us try to answer this question with an initially quite simple model of the relevant actors for about whom we ask the “who benefits” question:

White capitalists  
White workers  
Black workers

There are four traditional answers to the questions of who benefits from the overall patterns of racial disadvantage of blacks:

- (1). *white workers exploit black workers*: there is actually a transfer of surplus from black workers to white workers → they are really in distinct classes. This is the strong version of internal colonialism arguments, theories of super-exploitation. White workers and white capitalists form a racial alliance because they share common interests in the exploitation of blacks. *White workers would be worse off if black workers simply disappeared.*

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(2). *white workers oppress black workers* but do not exploit them: they benefit from exclusionary practices, but do not receive direct transfers = split labor market theories. White workers would *not* be worse off if black workers disappeared.

(3). *white workers neither oppress nor exploit black workers*: capitalists differentially exploit different categories of workers, but all workers suffer from the differential exploitation = traditional Marxist class analysis. *Capitalists alone benefit from racism*.

(4). *The differential exploitation of black and white workers is of decreasing relevance*. The key issue = the marginalization of segments of the black population from the system of exploitation altogether: the theory of the underclass. *The underclass = oppressed but not consistently exploited* (e.g. welfare mothers; permanently unemployed; “criminal underclass”). Racial conflict therefore centers on the State’s intervention to deal with underclass phenomena, not directly on class antagonisms/competition between black and white workers.

Different theorists have different answers:

**Wilson:** historical transition from preindustrial slave relations (white ruling class exploits black slaves), to industrial period (white workers oppress black workers through job competition and exclusion) to contemporary period (differential exploitation disappearing where class inequalities among blacks matter more than between blacks and whites).

**Bonacich:** white workers oppress black workers through exclusions, segmented labor markets = classic divide and conquer dynamic: by structuring the labor market in particular ways, capitalists can pit the real interests of different groups of workers against each other.

**Reich:** capitalists exploit workers of different races differentially. Racial divisions hurt both black and white workers. The econometric data on this are quite compelling: white workers are worse off under conditions where black workers are most oppressed. The wages of white workers are highest when the inequalities between black and white workers are least.

At different times and places each of these views may be correct. There is no particular reason to believe that there is a single, overarching profile of interests that link class and race.

One problem with all of these views, however, is that they fail to pay much attention to the real specificity of “racialization” as a dimension of cleavage, about why this specific form of cleavage has such staying power, such bite, through its interconnection with class. I would like to propose a way of looking at this issue that may help clarify this.

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### 3. Why racialized inequality is especially robust

#### 3.1 The problem of rational material interests of privileged white workers

Let's return to our three actor model:

White capitalists  
White workers  
Black workers

Now, I want to assume – for the moment – the following relationships among these actors:

1. White capitalists exploit workers – both white and black workers.
2. White workers are privileged within these relations of exploitation relative to black workers
3. These privileges occur because of a range of processes that exclude black workers from equal opportunity to better jobs. This includes bad schools as well as labor market discrimination and related issues.

Now, the question I want to ask is this: under what conditions would be it “rational” for the white workers to support strong solidarity with the black workers – to join forces to fight capital? In what circumstances would it be in the *narrow material interests* of white workers to support fully the struggles of black workers. This emphatically does not mean that in the world itself the only reason for white workers to be solidaristic with black workers is narrow material interests. White workers may feel that it is unjust that black workers are excluded from equal opportunity and they may support struggles for equality on moral, social justice grounds. But it may also be in the selfish, material interests of white workers to do so.

The traditional claims of Marxists has always been that racism hurts white workers as well as black workers: unite and fight. Sometimes this may be true: solidarity pays. Workers untied are stronger, and as a united force they can win a better deal from capital for all workers.

But this may not be the case for a variety of reasons. Consider three possibilities:

1. The gap between black and white workers is so large that *so long as capitalism exists* the only way equality can be achieved is by lowering white wages. Unless solidarity leads to the overthrow of capitalism, therefore, it would *not* be true that unity is in the *narrow material interests* of privileged white workers to be solidaristic with super-exploited black workers.
2. The gap may not be prohibitively big, but when you add into the equation the costs of struggle and the uncertainty of success, then it could still be the case that risk-averse white workers are better off not being solidaristic.

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3. It could be that the gap can be closed without prohibitive costs, but that this means that so long as significant inequality between privileged and under-privileged workers exists some white workers will be worse off than they would otherwise have been, even if the average white worker improves his position. Solidarity among privileged workers, therefore, would face a trade off between gains for the average person in that group (if they were solidaristic with black workers) and potentially significant losses to some members of the privileged group (as they lose jobs to black workers).

Under all of these conditions, solidarity between the collectivity of white workers and black workers would be problematic. BUT – and here is the critical issue:

### *3.2 The material interests of privileged workers in the absence of racial division*

Suppose that the sharply divided categories of privileged and disadvantaged workers did *not* correspond to a racial divide. Suppose that the working class was ethnically and racially homogeneous across these strata of relative privilege. How would this change the equation – again from the point of view of strict material interests (not moral concern)? The pivotal difference, I think, is that *over time there would likely develop a relatively thick pattern of social ties across the privilege boundary*, especially ties of kinship, but also community: people would have children, siblings, cousins, parents on the other side of this divide, and certainly friends and community members. Even more crucially, even for people without such direct, hard social ties across the privileged strata boundary, they would exist in a socio-economic space within which they had a reasonable probability of having such ties in the future (or had them in the past). What this means is that the concept of “narrow material interests” would be stretched in ways that span the privilege divide to a much greater extent than when this divide corresponds in significant ways to race or ethnicity.

This is an important point to really understand: the notion of “selfish material interests” is ambiguous about the category of people subsumed under the “self”: the individual? One’s immediate family? One’s extended family? Friends? Market relations continually push for an atomization of the definition of the relevant unit for self-interest; kinship and community relations push for a stretching of this unit. And since interests have a temporal dimension – one has material interests in the material well-being of one’s children in the future, not just instantaneously in the present – the probability of such ties across privileged strata matter for the definition of interests. In Sweden, for fifty years, skilled workers strongly supported a labor movement which systematically worked to flatten out wage differentials between highly skilled and unskilled workers – the famous “solidarity wage” of Sweden. Arguably the ethnic and racial homogeneity of the working class was very important for this.

### 3.3 Racial Division and cross-strata class solidarity

Back to the problem of Race: The key issue here is the way race especially and ethnicity usually to a somewhat lesser extent define *communities of deep interpersonal relations*, especially kinship. Racialized social division, especially, is a powerful obstacle to intermarriage, and this blocks the proliferation of the kinds of ties that stretch interests.

Now, here is the kicker: when a racial division corresponds to cleavage between privileged and underprivileged categories within the class structure, this means that cross-strata solidarities are likely to be significantly weakened, and this means that the collective basis for solidaristic struggle against the exclusions that generate the division are also likely to be weaker. It also means that the issue raised in condition 3 above are also likely to be much stronger: the fate of one's friends, children, kin, within the privileged category would matter more than the fate of the average person in that category. This suggests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: The greater the correspondence between strata within the working class and racial division, the weaker will be the potential for class solidarity across these strata. This weakened class solidarity will, in turn, reinforce the distinctively racial form of inequality.*

What this means is that even if it is the case that capitalists exploit both privileged white workers and underprivileged black workers, under conditions of a strong correspondence between race and class-based privileges, cross-race solidarity will be very difficult to sustain and thus collective challenges to racial oppression will be weakened.

But this also suggests another hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: As the correspondence between class and race declines or is eroded, the basis for collective challenges to racial inequality increases.*

### 3.4 The Specificity of Racial Oppression *within class analysis*

To return to our starting point, racial division can be seen as a particularly strong form of a more general theoretical category: *forms of social division that block the creation of communal ties through kinship*. The specific biological lineage mechanism in racialized social interaction, then, is particularly salient because of its close connection to family-formation and thus kinship formation. When this division becomes a form of oppression through its links to forms of economic exclusion, and thus class relations, a self-reinforcing cycle is generated.

Racialized oppression, then, is part of a family of divisions and oppression that, in different times and places, can be closely linked to tribal membership, ethnicity, or religion, if these all determine lines of communal ties and barriers to the formation of the kinds of social ties – especially kin but also friendships – which help stretch the definition of material interests.

## II. The Transformation of the Southern Racial State

David Jaime's research on sharecropping and racial oppression is a specific illustration of this complex problem of the interaction of class and race.

**1. Core thesis:** The Southern racial state was instituted and stabilized because it was a solution to a serious problem in the post-civil war era. The problem was this: how to secure the extraction of surplus labor from peasants in a liberal democracy? This was an acute problem especially in cotton agriculture. Solution to the labor extraction problem = sharecropping. Problem = the need for coercive mechanisms to reproduce these relations, prevent coalitions with poor whites, prevent excessive labor migration (keep the peasants on the land). Racialized sharecropping with political disenfranchisement was the successful solution.

Alternative hypothesis: there was a pervasive, intractable culture of racism generated by slavery. As soon as the North withdrew, this southern racism was unleashed to restore racial domination, the driving force being white racist identities, prejudice, hatred, etc.

**2. Empirical claim (David James):** if the class analysis thesis is correct, then prediction =

(a) that the resiliency or fragility of the racial state would depend significantly upon its correspondence to the underlying material conditions linked to the class structure.

(b) that challenges to the racial state would be both easier and more likely to be successful when the class structure no longer functionally depended upon it.

### 3. Historical Trajectory of creation, stability, dissolution of the Southern Racial State:

**1. material conditions at creation:** Dissolution of Slavery: manifest problems of surplus extraction, stabilization of labor force.

**2. political conditions at creation: populist threat:** threat of black/white poor alliance → escalation of KKK

**3. solution:** the creation of widespread sharecropping

**4. Superstructural consolidation:** Jim Crow laws to disempower sharecroppers; vagrancy laws to enforce surplus extraction; etc.

**5. New Deal Agriculture:** agricultural relief programs → unintended consequence of massive incentives from above which to eliminate sharecropping → acceleration of the dissolution of this form of class relations. By 1950s coercive extraction of surplus had almost disappeared.

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**6. Cold War & postWWII US world position** → National geopolitical reasons to end racial state in the South

**7. Resistance to destruction of racial state in late 1950s and 1960s:** greatest in those countries with the strongest legacies of sharecropping.