1 Almost a Race War

The Climate of the Late 1960s

The conflict between an increasingly militant black movement and a society whose white majority resisted most of its demands had escalated throughout the 1960s. Black–white relations and attitudes were already polarized in April 1968, when the rioting that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., led many Americans to believe that the long-feared racial civil war had finally arrived.

At the time of the assassination I was carrying out research based on depth interviews with black and white Americans that encompassed the life histories of our subjects, as well as their attitudes toward contemporary social problems, particularly race relations. No topic revealed such a chasm between the races as the death of King. For Afro-Americans, the loss was a personal one, like a death in the family. But many of the whites we talked to were indifferent to the assassination, as well as highly critical of the civil rights martyr. And even some of the people who were shocked or saddened by King's death told us that if that civil war did come to pass, they were prepared to shoot and kill blacks, including their black friends.

The spring and summer of 1968 saw an ever-growing sense of crisis, but the issues that divided the nation transcended race. The success of the North Vietnamese Tet offensive, coupled with the increasing mass support for the antiwar movement, caused President Lyndon Johnson to announce that he would not seek re-election that year. America seemed to be dividing into two camps: those who were for "the system" and those who were against it.

Two years earlier, during the summer of 1966, Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had first raised the call for "Black Power" during a march for civil rights in Mississippi. The idea of Black Power would help further radicalize the black movement and polarize the races. The media contributed to this polarization. Instead of emphasizing the straightforward meanings of Black Power—self-determination for Afro-Americans in controlling their own communities and defining their cultural realities—the press, as well as many white politicians, played up (and even manufactured) sinister undertones of violence, racial revenge, and black domination.

Black Power played an important role in the Afro-American quest for a positive sense of identity, which in turn forced members of the majority to confront their "whiteness" and to think long and hard about their personal responsibility for the system of racial inequality.

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If the call for "Freedom Now!" epitomized the first decade of the modern civil rights movement that began with the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott of 1955–56, the racial politics of the late 1960s centered on the demand for "Black Power." First articulated in 1966 by SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael an other young militants, Black Power stressed self-determination, the right of ethnic minorities to define their group identity and to make the decisions that affected their lives. Since the rules of the "system" were biased, the advocates of Black Power would invent their own rules, use "any means necessary," in the words of Malcolm X, the militants' theoretician and martyred hero.

In the black community this new mood provoked an intense debate about priorities and strategies for change. Should Afro-Americans continue to demand their right to participate fully in every aspect of American life, in essence following the white middle-class model for mobility and success? Or, since they would never be accepted as equal citizens in a racist society, would always be a group apart, should they instead turn inward and develop the strengths and potential of the black community as an economic, political, and cultural force that could stand on its own? "A decade of racial dialectics—of the cut and thrust of white racism and Black Power," as Thomas Blair explains, had touched the emotional roots of an ethnic ambivalence.[1] As the promise of America seemed to wither in violent conflicts—a divisive war, disruptions on college campuses, and political assassinations—blacks pondered James Baldwin's rhetorical question: "Would you want to integrate into a burning house?"

Integration versus separatism (or black nationalism)—a "choice" that proved to be oversimplified when posed as mutually exclusive alternatives—emerged as the central issue in the black politics of the late 1960s. This controversy had, of course, dominated black political thought for more than a century, but, except for the Garvey movement in the 1920s, the integrationist-separatist debate had been confined to a small circle of intellectuals. In the sixties the discussion moved out onto the streets—and onto television, which played a critical role in defining and publicizing what had been a private in-group debate. Television focused on the most extreme positions, playing up, even exaggerating, the differences between them. The media coverage emphasized personalities and turned leaders into symbols: Martin Luther King versus Malcolm X and the Black Muslims; later, King versus Stokely Carmichael.

Though some of the people we interviewed stressed the complementarity of the moderate and the militant strategies, the pendulum was clearly swinging to the younger generation of nationalists, especially in the North and West. Pro-integration leaders like Whitney Young of the Urban League and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP seemed outmoded com-

pared to Carmichael or the Black Panthers. And even Martin Luther King was called a "has-been."

Black Power, Violence, and the Police

In 1968 almost all the blacks we interviewed, including the moderates, favored some form of Black Power. The slogan had stimulated wide interest, but it was too ambiguous a term to be a focal point for developing a unified political strategy. To moderate blacks, Black Power meant building up black business; to liberals, it denoted greater electoral participation and more educational and employment opportunities. To cultural nationalists and many intellectuals, Black Power signified the right of black people to define their own group realities, choose their priorities, write their history, create a culture. Political nationalists stressed the importance of building autonomous all-black institutions—schools, businesses, police—in their communities. Militants of various tendencies equated Black Power with fighting back against racist provocations. In the vehemence of militant rhetoric, many whites—and not a few blacks—sensed undertones of violence.

The shift from integration to Black Power confused whites. They wondered what blacks really wanted, what they would do next. Schooled by traditions of racist thought to view blacks categorically, whites expected them to speak with one voice and had difficulty appreciating their personal, philosophical, and political diversity. If blacks wanted to build their own separate communities, whites asked, why are they still demanding special treatment in the system—at work or at school?

In the separatist rhetoric of the Black Power advocates, whites also saw a rejection of consensual values, particularly the national myth of the melting pot. And by tirelessly pointing the finger at America's racist structure, black militants challenged the commonly held idea that a minority group could find equality and justice through the normal workings of the American way. Further, the militants were no longer willing to wait for the fate of their people to slowly improve as the result of aggregate personal efforts and sacrifices made by specific individuals; they wanted immediate equality for all blacks.

In challenging basic American values and myths, Black Power advocates antagonized virtually every strand of white opinion. The greatest opposition came from liberals, whose integrationist credo was offended by Black Power's separatist emphasis. "Colorblind" liberals especially objected to the idea that power blocs should be based on race. Conservatives tended to be more comfortable than liberals with frank talk about power, but few welcomed its association with people of color. More

explicit racists insisted that power should remain with whites. Even most white radicals, otherwise sympathetic to black militancy, expressed skepticism, seeing Black Power as a threat to the fragile bonds among the sixties' anti-establishment movements or as an obstacle to the Marxist dream of working-class unity or the counterculture's vision of universal love.

The idea of Black Power also tapped into deep-seated fears and anxieties, highly emotional associations between race and violence. Whites had difficulty accepting that Black Power was what blacks said it was: community control, economic autonomy, and political self-determination. Though some learned to appreciate these meanings, most suspected that Black Power was a disguised call to use violence to achieve black domination. Black rioting in the cities, the appearance of nationalist groups "taking up the gun," and the pervasive talk—as well as the reality—of political and personal violence gave shape to racist fears. In such a highly charged atmosphere, most whites did not make a sharp distinction between a principled adherence to nonviolence and a more open-ended political strategy. They saw instead the aggressive potential in any militant action, sensed the threat of violence even in nonviolent civil disobedience.

At the same time, many blacks were hard pressed to maintain their own commitment to nonviolence. The strategy of "turning the other cheek" appealed to religious ideals and to an Afro-American redemptive humanism that had been a strikingly successful tactic in the early stages of the civil rights movement. But temperateness was increasingly seen as ineffective, cowardly, even unmanly. Nonviolence had not prevented civil rights workers in the South from being beaten and killed; in the North nonviolence had little to offer the younger generation of low-income blacks, particularly the street youth who saw in groups like the Black Panthers a more appropriate vehicle for their rebellious mentality.

When "riots"—more often termed "rebellions" or "revolts" by politically conscious militants—first erupted in 1964 and 1965, even moderate blacks were sympathetic, understanding the depth of the anger that lay behind the outbursts. Many of these blacks were hopeful that such extreme measures would spur fundamental reforms. By the time we began our interviews, however, people were very critical of the violence. Their objections were not based on a moral condemnation so much as a cost-benefit analysis: what was the political payoff of rioting, when only their own communities were being destroyed, their own people dominating the list of dead and wounded?

This may explain why the summer of 1967 was the last of the "long

hot summers." Although some of the decade's heaviest rioting followed the assassination of Dr. King in April 1968, there were no major ghetto revolts during the summers of 1968 or 1969, years when racial tension was otherwise at its peak. Rather, riotlike actions in the late sixties moved away from the "Watts model" toward more focused settings: high schools, colleges, and especially prisons. There were also organized actions by black nationalist groups against the police in a number of cities. Many blacks to whom we talked in 1968 were moving toward an acceptance of this kind of controlled, focused violence—but not without conflict. They searched their souls to find ways to reconcile their ethical values with the growing feeling that desperate measures were necessary, especially in dealing with the police.

The police were major actors in the racial drama. Because they were on the front lines, trying to contain riots, seeing that civil rights and other demonstrations operated within the law, and making arrests in racially sensitive situations, their role was often controversial. Blacks and whites viewed them quite differently. Most blacks saw law enforcement as the country's most racist institution. Though they appreciated the need for public safety and deterring criminals, they resented being harassed by white cops and were disturbed by widespread allegations of brutality. As law enforcement became more politicized, targeting militant organizations such as the Black Panthers, many blacks began to view white police forces as colonial armies of occupation.

For many whites, in contrast, the police were the "thin blue line" protecting them from anarchy, revolution, and black violence. Often with friends or relatives on the local force, whites tended to identify with police officers, seeing them as workers with a job to do, decent men besieged by belligerent blacks, overzealous antiwar activists, and rebellious college students. A solid majority of whites approved the actions of the Chicago police in suppressing radical antiwar demonstrators at the Democratic Convention in 1968; blacks overwhelmingly disapproved.[2] A year earlier, after the decade's worst riots in Detroit and Newark, a Harris poll showed that whites had supported, by a ratio of 2.5 to 1, the police's shooting of looters; blacks had disapproved by the same ratio.[3] And unlike black people, most whites did not agree with the Kerner Commission's premise that urban riots were spontaneous manifestations of discontent arising from discrimination and prejudice. Instead, whites suspected that the violence was the result of agitation by communists or by leaders such as King and Carmichael—to many whites the political differences between moderate and militant black leadership seemed unimportant.

Black Identity and White Consciousness

Throughout the 1960s blacks were becoming more aware of their systematic oppression, of the institutional character of the racism that marked the parameters of their existence—their present lives as well as past histories. It was common then to say that no black person had to learn this, for each had lived it directly, his or her consciousness of oppression forged in the pain of survival. The interviews we conducted suggest that this was more true for the older southern-reared generation, which had experienced the clearcut lines of traditional segregation. But there were quite a few others, mostly northern-raised youth or Californians, who told us that they had never been discriminated against, never really knew what "all the fuss was about" until the movements and the mood of the sixties began their education in race relations, giving them for the first time a sense of racial grievance.

Along with an intensifying awareness of racism came a new attitude toward black ethnic identity. Many of our interviews capture the still-fresh excitement of this discovery, as positive feelings like pride and identification replace negative ones like self-doubt and alienation. Pride in blackness and the new identification with "black culture" also suggested a solution to the dilemma of integration. On the one hand, to get one's fair share of society's benefits, it was necessary to participate, at least to a certain extent, in the mainstream, which was, after all, "the only game in town." On the other hand, if integration meant "becoming white," compromising one's ethnicity and deepest self, it seemed less and less worth the price. During the late sixties, black pride, black culture, and Black Power promised to give Afro-Americans a way to negotiate this dilemma, to feel that they were setting some of the terms of the assimilation bargain.

Many blacks we talked to remained skeptical about the existence of a black culture—until the 1960s the standard view had been that slavery and assimilation had eliminated most vestiges of distinctive ethnicity—but others celebrated its growing recognition. They searched for their culture's themes and essential features and inventoried its strengths and weaknesses. Black Power with its separatist overtones was appealing because it promised to nourish and preserve the uniqueness of the black experience. This fear that the communal solidarity of black life would be lost in the American melting pot also contributed to the widespread ambivalence toward integration in the late 1960s.

The word *black* itself symbolized this new outlook, and its rapid acceptance showed the power of this "cultural revolution." In our earliest interviews, everyone—black and white alike—referred to people of Afro-

American descent primarily as *Negroes*. By late 1968 (for blacks) and by the summer of 1969 (for whites) the dominant, almost exclusive, usage was *black* people.

In emphasizing race and racism so markedly, in flaunting their blackness so aggressively, the black militants forced many whites to confront the fatefulness of skin color and its social implications. Living in a multiracial society with democratic ideals and a colorblind ideology, whites as the dominant group had not experienced race and racism as pressing realities in their everyday lives. Especially since de facto segregation limited regular contacts with racial minorities, American whites had been able to confine their "whiteness" to remote corners of their consciousness, identifying themselves primarily as Americans, or as Irish or Italians, Catholics or Baptists. Outside the South (and the minds of transplanted southerners), whiteness per se was rarely a significant component of personal identity. (The very phrase "white identity" seems strange and jarring.) In the 1960s, however, blacks made it harder for whites to keep their racial identities so conveniently compartmentalized. Black actions impinged on white lives directly: at work, in the community, above all in politics and public life. The black demand that Euro-Americans own up to their whiteness met resistance. People who saw themselves as fair-minded and committed to equality and individual responsibility did not want to face the possibility that their social position might be, even in part, the product of racial privilege.

This issue of who was responsible for racial inequality was not an abstract one, because it was tied to the practical matter of who would pay the costs of social change. In broad terms, whites addressed the question in one of three ways. First, they could accept personal responsibility for racism, viewing themselves and their families, friends, and fellow workers as personally implicated in the problems of black Americans. Having acknowledged their own racist bias, they could decide how best to act on this new self-understanding. And a few whites did wrestle with these agonies, sometimes in affecting ways, like the hippies we talked to who considered themselves racists just because they *noticed* differences of color.

But other whites didn't feel like racists. They thought of themselves as decent human beings, as people deserving what little they had achieved in their lives, not as oppressors or exploiters. Some adopted a sociological explanation of racism, condemning the society itself as a racially oppressive one. Among the people we interviewed, the liberals and the radicals in particular took this position and supported, if only ambivalently, fundamental social change to create racial justice.

Fundamental social change, however, threatened whites' own interests, and most whites found the analysis of racism as an impersonal force,

an attribute of a system rather than of individuals, too abstract, too removed from their personal experience, or just plain wrong. So the majority took a third view. They neutralized the reality of racism by minimizing their own color privileges and denying their personal prejudices. Rather than indicting themselves or the social system, they "blamed the victim," locating the barriers to racial equality in the characteristics of the minority group. With traditional racism discredited as an ideology, few people now blamed the "deficits" of blacks on biology or genetics. More fashionable was some version of "cultural deprivation." Blacks were not able to advance like other groups because they lacked the critical attributes necessary for success: education, motivation, good work habits, discipline, and family cohesiveness.[4]

Why There Was No Race War

Underlying and facilitating racial and social ferment in the 1960s was an unprecedented economic boom. Employers' needs for more workers dovetailed with civil rights pressures to bring down discriminatory barriers, and blacks entered new industries and occupations. Paradoxically, these changes were too slow for the excluded minorities, whose expectations had been raised throughout the decade, and at the same time too fast for the white majority, whose interests seemed threatened by the prospect of racial change. As the nation moved slowly toward greater equality, conflict increased rather than lessened.

Conflict particularly intensified in day-to-day personal encounters. In every sphere of life, blacks challenged the spoken and unspoken assumptions that had governed race relations for generations. No longer were they accepting an inferior position, especially in the racial struggle itself. Those sympathetic whites who had once played important, even leading, roles in racial politics found themselves unwelcome in civil rights organizations.

For centuries blacks had lived in fear of whites. Now whites were afraid of blacks, their political militancy, their new aggressiveness, their potential violence. Whereas whites, as the "superior race," had long rejected blacks, now black people—especially the separatists—were rejecting whites, as political allies, as carriers of values, as models to be emulated. Instead of taking racial insults, blacks were calling the names "whitey," "honky," "racist"—and whites were learning how it felt to be the object of racial hatred, to be viewed categorically rather than as individuals. To many, it seemed as if the customary relationship between the races was being turned on its head.

Still, communication between blacks and whites was not closed. In the

workplace, whites were hearing from black co-workers viewpoints on Black Power and other issues that countered the more alarming ideas they picked up from television and other whites. But whites sensed a change in black attitudes and demeanor, an anger and a withdrawal that were hard to deal with. Their most common complaint was that blacks were becoming too "touchy."

In other places where the races met—in high schools and the streets of mixed neighborhoods—racial tension was even more pronounced. In San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury white hippies complained of the frequent street hassles provoked by blacks. As one very pro-black hippy put it, poignantly but without a trace of irony: "It's so hard to be white these days." For their part, blacks, even moderates still committed to racial harmony, integration, and nonviolence, took some measure of delight in these reversals.

The great fear of whites was that blacks would go all the way and turn the tables. They thought blacks wanted to dominate them, just as blacks had been dominated. On both sides fear and paranoia were rife. Many blacks talked of genocidal plots, of concentration camps being readied. Whites thought that black militants were organizing armed insurrection, that their goal was to seize power through violent revolution. Especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King, people of both races worried that a civil war between whites and blacks might break out. One white man we talked to regretted the prospect of having to shoot some of his Negro friends; other whites contemplated going over to the black side; interracial couples agonized over their special predicament. At bottom, most people really didn't think it would come to a civil war, but the specter of racial holocaust aggravated the despair and pessimism of many blacks and intensified the fear of many whites.

Despite the widening color gap, racial division was never total, even during the polarized year of 1968. Though the polls found blacks consistently more opposed than whites to the war in Vietnam, some black conservatives sounded very much like white backlashers, supporting both the war and the actions of the Chicago police. And some whites were highly critical of the police and supportive of black militancy. Thus the forces that seemed to be dividing the society into two camps—either for or against "the system"—were not simply racial. The division was based rather on a collision between differing political priorities and philosophical assumptions about American society and social change.

On one side were those whose sense of urgency about racial problems transcended other concerns and values. Viewing racism and racial inequality as American democracy's most vital unfinished business, this group wanted to take advantage of the unique opportunity for a funda-

mental breakthrough that had been opened by the civil rights movement and, later, by the black militants. For those who held this position, the goal of incorporating blacks in the system was so paramount that it justified drastic changes in institutions and values to accommodate the special needs and interests of the previously excluded minorities. If such changes threatened an already fragile social order, the risk was worth taking, since it was these very institutions and values—whatever their democratic presumptions or "positive functioning"—that maintained a racially stratified society. Not surprisingly, this position was held by many (though not necessarily most) blacks, along with a small (though not necessarily insignificant) segment of the white population.

The "other side" had different priorities. Whether or not they supported the goal of racial equality, their major concern was the defense of a society whose integrity and stability seemed threatened by the divisiveness, the widespread violence, and the near anarchy of the time. For this group what was at stake was the democratic process itself. And because black militants insisted on setting their own rules and procedures and refused to accept conventional understandings of how to effect change, they were perceived as a threat to basic precepts of America's political culture. If black demands had merit, they must be accommodated to the consensual values of the society; racial minorities could not expect privileges unavailable to other groups. Most whites probably agreed with this point of view, and so did more than a few blacks and other minorities. Of course, there were people of both races who would not have subscribed to either position. They were somewhere in the middle, politically apathetic or uninterested in racial issues.

The events of the late 1960s challenged many people's assumptions and made them think about America and its social problems, especially race, on a deeper level. Ordinary people, not just intellectuals, struggled to make sense of the racial crisis, advancing theories to explain racial inequality, the urban riots, and the differences among minority groups. They approached a gamut of social issues with sophisticated critical perspectives; they drew generalizations from the conflicts and the public discourse of the time; and many of them experienced for the first time the excitement of participating in historically significant social movements and contributing to social change. Above all, people of every ethnic background debated issues of race and racism with the kind of urgency that the nation had not witnessed since the debates over slavery and Reconstruction a hundred years earlier.

2 Theoretical Perspectives

I first taught the sociology of race and ethnic relations at the University of Chicago in 1963. Two years later this specialty became the focus of my research and writing. As I read the literature I was struck by the weakness of the theoretical frameworks purporting to explain the most important division in American society. Even though I was learning from these theories, they had an ad hoc quality and seemed unconnected to the great traditions of social thought—unlike theories about social class, work and organizations, and political sociology I had studied.

It would have been unfair to expect race relations theory to predict the big news of the era: the eruption of a modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and that movement's turn from the goal of integration to that of Black Power and nationalism in the late 1960s. Almost everyone had been caught short by these historic events. But something had to be seriously wrong with theories whose logic pointed in a direction diametrically opposed to the drift of social change. The idea that I might be able to develop a better theoretical framework for the sociology of racial and ethnic relations inspired much of my writing during the late 1960s.

This chapter traces the failure of race theory to the fact that the giants of social thought whose ideas had shaped American sociology—Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Toennies, and Georg Simmel—all believed, despite their many differences, that racial and ethnic allegiances were primordial bonds that were destined to disappear as traditional societies gave way to modern ones. But just the opposite had happened; in the United States, race remained *at least* as central as class to our social order, pervasive and powerful in its impact on every area of existence.

I also take a critical look at the five perspectives on race in America that dominated the literature during the 1950s and 1960s. My shorthand labels for these "theories" are the *assimilation approach,* the *immigrant analogy, caste and class,* the focus on *prejudice and discrimination,* and *economic class reductionism.* During the 1970s and 1980s these theories would be critiqued by other scholars, with the result that they have been largely replaced by newer and more satisfactory frameworks (for example, the "racial formation" theory developed by Howard Winant and Michael Omi). But these old ideas still live in the minds of ordinary Americans. The immigrant analogy may no longer be popular among social scientists, but who has not heard a third-generation descendant of a European ethnic group voice words like, "My grandparents were poor and they made it, so why can't the blacks?"

THE PRESENT crisis in American life has led to the questioning of long-accepted frameworks. The pressure of events has forced intellectuals and social scientists to reexamine old definitions of the character of our society, the role of racism, and the workings of basic institutions. The

depth and volatility of contemporary racial conflict challenge sociologists in particular to assess the adequacy of the theoretical models by which we have explained American race relations in the past.

In my view social theory should identify the significant social forces and trends of a historical period and, at the least, illuminate the relations among them. As a sociologist who was attempting to analyze the big news of the 1960s, I found that general sociological theory, as well as the more specific "theories" in the race relations field, was pointing in the wrong direction. These theories failed to predict and illuminate new developments—the shift from civil rights to group power strategies, the outbreak of rebellions in the urban ghettos, the growth of militant nationalism and ethnic consciousness—in short, the deepening of racial awareness and conflict in America. Furthermore, the "theories" actually obscured the meaning of these issues, making them more difficult to comprehend.

The Sociology of Race: An Alternative Framework Needed

The present work parts company with the leading ideas and implicit assumptions that until recently, at least, have guided most American social scientists in their study of (or reluctance to consider) our racial order: First, the view that racial and ethnic groups are neither central nor persistent elements of modern societies. Second, the idea that racism and racial oppression are not independent dynamic forces but are ultimately reducible to other causal determinants, usually economic or psychological. Third, the position that the most important aspects of racism are the attitudes and prejudices of white Americans. And, finally, the so-called *immigrant analogy,* the assumption, critical in contemporary thought, that there are no essential long-term differences—in relation to the larger society—between the *third world* or racial minorities and the European ethnic groups.

In his *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* Harold Cruse describes how Marxist interpretations of race and nationality came to dominate the perspectives of leading Afro-American theorists and political figures, even though this framework of analysis arose out of specific European conditions, which varied considerably from American realities.[1] In my view, sociology in the United States experienced a somewhat similar distortion, which had profound consequences for its outlook on race—although in this case it was not only Marxism but the larger structure of European social thought that steered American scholars off course. Despite the fact that the young discipline of sociology was not theory conscious before World War II, the limited and pragmatic concepts it utilized were predominantly home-grown.

Therefore, the leading figures of its developing years—such men as Albion Small, William Graham Sumner, W. I. Thomas, Charles Cooley, and Robert Park—gave major attention to race relations in their writings.[2] The life conditions and problems of immigrant groups and racial minorities were perhaps the predominant research emphasis. After the war the prestige of European social theory overpowered the contributions of the indigenous American sociologists and provided the basis for the conceptual schemes that today inform social science analysis of modern societies, including the United States.

For my purpose the most important assumption in this body of social theory is the idea that as industrial societies develop and mature, race and ethnicity become increasingly irrelevant as principles of group formation, collective identity, and political action. This assumption, so strikingly at odds with contemporary realities in the modern world as a whole as well as in the United States, can be traced directly to the impact of European social analysis.[3]

Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Toennies, and Georg Simmel stand as the great pioneers of sociology. Diverse as their theories were, a concern with interpreting the new bourgeois industrial order that had replaced a more traditional feudal society was a central intellectual priority for each of these scholars. In analyzing the modern world and the social forces that gave rise to it, they devoted relatively scant attention to ethnic and racial division and conflict. They saw such social bonds as essentially parochial survivals from preindustrial societies, and fundamentally opposed to the logic of modernity. Marx assumed that national differences would dissolve as the world proletariat developed a vision and practice based on class consciousness; he saw the more complex social differentiation of the past giving way to a dynamic of simplification and polarization that was leading to the predominance of only two classes as significant social forces. Durkheim and Toennies developed ideal types of traditional and modern social structures: *mechanical solidarity* versus *organic solidarity,* and the *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* dichotomy, respectively. Ethnic solidarity belonged to the earlier social forms. Their conceptions of modern social arrangements precluded sentimental attachments based on race or ethnicity, or at least the likelihood that men would act on them consistently and frequently. Simmel saw in the city a metropolitan way of life in which such primordial bonds (to use Edward Shils's term) must lose their power and persistence.[4] And for Weber, perhaps the least disposed among them to an evolutionary perspective (and, incidentally, the theorist whose constructs are potentially the most fruitful for analyzing race and ethnicity), the basic historical dynamic—the movement from tradition to rationality—also appeared to indicate a weaken-

ing of these ties.[5] Thus the general conceptual frame of European theory implicitly assumed the decline and disappearance of ethnicity in the modern world; it offered no hints in the other direction. Without significant alteration, American sociology synthesized this framework into its models of social structure and change.

Rather than race, ethnicity, and nationality, the characteristic features of modern industrial societies were the centrality of classes and social stratification (Marx, Weber), the growth and ubiquity of large-scale bureaucratic organizations (Weber, Robert Michels), the trend toward occupational and professional specialization (Durkheim), and the dominance of the metropolis and its distinctive patterns and problems over less urban areas and concerns (Simmel, Toennies, and Durkheim). After World War II the subfields of sociology devoted to these phenomena were favored by the overall logic of social theory; specialties such as stratification, organizations, politics, urban studies, and so on, were thereby linked to the major theoretical paradigms and fertilized with the seminal ideas and conceptual schemes that were the European legacy to the American discipline. These fields also attracted the most talented scholars because their concerns penetrated the heart of modern society and its dynamics. After a promising start in the early period, the study of race and ethnic relations suffered correspondingly. With little room for ethnic and racial phenomena in the macroscopic models of social structure and process, the field was isolated from general sociological theory and particularly from those leading conceptual themes that might have provided coherence and useful lines of inquiry: stratification, culture, community. The study of race relations developed in a kind of vacuum; no overall theoretical framework guided its research and development. Not surprisingly, it has failed to attract leading social scientists, particularly during the past twenty-five to thirty years. While the fields of organization and bureaucracy, industry and occupation, interaction and deviance, have grown in depth and sophistication during the past generation, the same has not been true of the study of race relations, especially in terms of theoretical advancement.[6]

Without support from a general social theory, the study of race relations in sociology became organized around a variety of disparate approaches or foci of analysis. The leading approaches developed in ad hoc fashion. They were not well integrated with one another; of particular significance, none of them was able to articulate racial and ethnic phenomena to the structure and dynamics of the larger society satisfactorily. These approaches—with perhaps one exception that I discuss below—shared the key assumption of general sociology that racial groups and racial conflict were epiphenomenal and ephemeral. Thus the dominant

perspectives within the subfield of race—among which the most representative have been Robert Park's theory of the race relations cycle and its present-day expression in the study of assimilation and ethnic groups, the caste-class model, the analysis of prejudice and discrimination, and the immigrant analogy—made it inevitable that sociological experts would miss the thrust of social change and movement during the 1950s and 1960s. A closer look at some of their key assumptions might help us understand why sociologists (not unlike other Americans) were caught napping by the intensity and scale of civil rights protest, the furor of ghetto revolt, and the rapidity with which Black Power, cultural nationalism, and other militant third world perspectives emerged and spread.

The Assimilationist Bias

The most influential theory within the sociology of American racial studies has been that of the *race relations cycle* advanced by Robert Park. According to Park, when dominant and minority groups come into contact, they enter a series of relationships that he characterizes in terms of successive stages of competition, accommodation, and assimilation. Though Park and his students never clarified the dynamics that would inevitably lead from one stage to the next, the assumption that assimilation and integration were the likely end-products of ethnic and racial diversity has dominated American sociology. On the question of black people, Park was ambivalent and ambiguous. At times he saw them as a group in the process of being assimilated, at other times as an exception to the cyclical scheme.[7]

In addition to supporting the idea that American society is based on a dynamic of integration, the "assimilationist bias" distorted the analysis of the attitudes and movements of minority groups. Louis Wirth, a student and colleague of Park, granted the possibility that minorities could have other goals—separation, cultural pluralism, militant dominance. However, his view that in America the assimilationist goal was the only viable one became standard.[8] Afro-Americans were considered even more assimilation oriented than the European immigrants because it was believed that they had no ethnic culture of their own. In recent years third world nationalists have pointed out the ideological repressiveness implicit in the assumption that the cultural traditions of people of color are either nonexistent or less valuable than those of the dominant society. They have noted how social scientists have tended to ignore or distort the experiences and values of such groups as Indians and Mexicans, who have long histories of resistance to assimilation. Although some sociologists have developed the concept of assimilation in less dogmatic directions and

qualified the rigid assumption of a *melting* pot solution (Milton Gordon and Nathan Glazer, especially),[9] most scholars did not seriously consider the possibility that racial minorities might prefer to build their own cultures and community institutions rather than choose absorption into the mainstream.

Caste and Class

The idea that assimilation and integration are the most probable outcomes of racial as well as ethnic heterogeneity rests on the assumption that racial oppression is an aberration rather than a fundamental principle of American society. The only major challenge to this premise within academic sociology has come from a group led by W. Lloyd Warner known as the *caste-class school.* Warner suggested that Negroes might be an exception to the general tendency toward ethnic assimilation because of the special power of color prejudice among white Americans.[10] In a series of studies of southern towns undertaken by his associates, John Dollard, Allison Davis, Burleigh Gardner, and Mary Gardner, the researchers were impressed by the similarity between the racial order they discovered and the historic caste system of India. They oriented their investigations around the castelike nature of the color line separating white and black, the class structure of each racial group, and the relations between these two principles of stratification.[11] This theoretical approach was useful for analyzing small communities over a limited period, and the idea of color caste had the special virtue of treating race and racial oppression as independent realities. But lacking the capacity to account for changes in racial patterns generated from within the system, it was a static conception. The only possibilities the caste-class school envisioned for obliterating the color line were southern industrialization and black migration to northern cities, processes that would thrust blacks and southern whites alike into the overall class system. Furthermore, this approach, like all the others, assumed, first, that a rigid racial order was a peculiarly rural phenomenon; second, that there was a fundamental disparity between northern and southern social structure; and third; that the North would be the spearhead of democratic racial change.

The Focus on Prejudice

Each of these three assumptions has been shattered by recent history. Although the emergence of the civil rights movement, and particularly its southern provenience, took sociology by surprise, the movement of the 1950s did not at first call into question the assimilationist premise. The

predominant goal of southern blacks was integration and equality in institutional treatment. In a few years, however, massive white resistance and a growing realization of the limits of the movement's very success began to shake up prevailing thought about race in America. Most critically, the civil rights period exposed the depth and pervasiveness of racism in a society that appeared, on the surface, to be moving toward equality.[12]

Social science experts assumed that this movement toward equality depended primarily on the reduction of prejudice in the white majority, rather than upon the collective actions of the oppressed groups themselves or upon basic transformations in the society. Here sociologists were reflecting the general ethos of American culture, which minimizes a consciousness of, and concern with, group power—with the structure of institutions and their constraints—emphasizing in their stead the ideas and attitudes of individuals. Gunnar Myrdal had written in 1944 that all major transformations in American race relations would stem from determinants on the white side of the color line.[13] Sociologists and psychologists began to focus their research on racial attitudes (a development that was also furthered by a fascination with the unparalleled power of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany), and public opinion surveys noted that from the thirties through the fifties and sixties there was a consistent decline in racial prejudice and stereotypic thinking.[14] The 1954 *Brown* decision by the Supreme Court appeared to confirm the idea that powerful white institutions would respond in time to these changes in attitudes. Yet very soon afterwards, with the Montgomery bus boycott and subsequent civil rights actions, the initiative toward change in race relations passed out of white hands. The continuing deepening of racial crisis and conflict made it more and more apparent that white attitudes were peripheral rather than primary determinants of racial arrangements. There were still sociologists celebrating the impressive decline in racial prejudice at the very moment that Watts burst into flames.

I would not deny that ideas of white superiority are powerful in their impact, and that stereotypes of racial minorities have a tenacious hold on the conscious and unconscious mind. But prejudiced attitudes are not the essence of racism. Racism is unfortunately too often equated with intense prejudice and hatred of the racially different—thus with people of evil intent. This kind of racial extremism—while all too prevalent and very likely on the upswing among some segments of the American people today—is not necessary for the maintenance of a racist social structure. Virulent prejudice tends to be reduced, and crude stereotypes changed, by education and by exposure to more sophisticated environments. The people of goodwill and tolerance who identify racism with prejudice can therefore exempt themselves from responsibility and involvement in our

system of racial injustice and inequality by taking comfort in their own "favorable" attitudes toward minority groups.

The error in this point of view is revealed by the fact that such people of goodwill help maintain the racism of American society and in some cases even profit from it. This takes place because racism is institutionalized. The processes that maintain domination—control of whites over nonwhites—are built into the major social institutions. These institutions either exclude or restrict the participation of racial groups by procedures that have become conventional, part of the bureaucratic system of rules and regulations. Thus there is little need for prejudice as a motivating force. Because this is true, the distinction between racism as an objective phenomenon, located in the actual existence of domination and hierarchy, and racism's subjective concomitants of prejudice and other motivations and feelings is a basic one.

THE IMMIGRANT ANALOGY AND ECONOMIC REDUCTIONISM

The perspective that has become most widely accepted recently is the immigrant analogy. It is based on an alleged similarity between the historical experience of European ethnic groups and the contemporary situation of racial minorities, who have become predominantly urban as a result of migrations from more rural areas of the South and Southwest. The analogy posits a common dynamic in the American experience through which lower-class and ethnically diverse outsiders become incorporated into the national consensus. Thus it may be viewed as an updated and perhaps sophisticated version of the assimilationist position. Although the immigrant analogy need not deny the special impact of racism, in practice its advocates tend to discount or minimize the pervasiveness of racial oppression, especially as a reality of the present period. In their view racism tends to be located in our past heritage of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. These historical forces and their present-day effects on the racially oppressed have slowed the assimilation and social mobility of people of color, maintaining minority groups in lower-class status for a longer period than was the case for the European ethnics. But for the common man who subscribes to this folk sociology, as well as for its academic exponents, racism is now largely a thing of the past. Therefore, those who hold this perspective are not pessimistic, despite the massive economic imbalances and social problems correlated with race. They assume that blacks, Chicanos, and even Native Americans will eventually follow the path of acculturation and "Americanization" marked out by the white immigrants. Thus the immigrant analogy

serves to bolster a desperate need of many Americans to believe that our society can solve its internal problems; it is a contemporary version of the myth of progress and opportunity.

A variant of this perspective is the common view that the social position, life styles, and social problems of urban racial minorities in the North are predominantly reflections of poverty and economic class status, since a racial hierarchy has not been officially sanctioned. If "racial" problems are essentially problems of a recent arrival into urban lower-class position, then acclimation to city life and economic mobility will in time reduce the salience of race itself. This tendency to reduce race to class has been practiced by radical theorists as well as liberal policy-makers. Marxists have expected that a developing class consciousness cutting across ethnic and racial lines would eliminate national and racial considerations and lead to the collective solidarity of oppressed groups. Liberal sociologists expected race and ethnic concerns to recede as large numbers of individuals from the minority groups began to move into the middle class. Curiously enough, in the recent period it has more often been the mobile and middle-class elements from third world groups who have asserted their racial identities most aggressively.

The most important spokesman for economic class reductionism has been Daniel Patrick Moynihan. As President Nixon's chief advisor on urban social problems, Moynihan suggested that the nation stop thinking and acting in terms of race and focus instead on the common problems associated with poverty and class. Moynihan and the Nixon administration assumed that racial groups and racial oppression would disappear as social forces if third world people and "liberal-radical" whites (to use Spiro Agnew's fine expression) ceased talking about them. Thus the economic class reductionism inherent in the conservative doctrine of *benign neglect* merges with the *colorblind approach* to social reality that many white liberals have long favored. These approaches are of course ostrich-like. Race and racism are not figments of demented imaginations, but are central to the economics, politics, and culture of this nation.

Colonialism and Racial Oppression

Racial oppression occupies a central and independent role in American life. Unfortunately, social science lacks a model of American society and its social structure in which racial division and conflict are basic elements rather than phenomena to be explained (or explained away) in terms of other forces and determinants. To close this theoretical gap, in part, I rely on the framework of colonialism.

The connections between the American racial experience and the impe-

rialism of Western societies have been blurred by the standard usage of the term "colonial America" in general parlance and in the field of history. In emphasizing the relations between the emerging nation of white settlers and the English mother country rather than the consolidation of white European control, the conventional usage separates the American experience from the matrix of Western European expansion. When we Americans think about European colonialism, it is the domination of Asia and Africa, which reached its peak in the late nineteenth century, that comes to mind. Yet American society has always been a part of this Western colonial dynamic, however isolated we were from the European center. Our own development proceeded on the basis of Indian conquests and land seizures, on the enslavement of African peoples, and in terms of a westward expansion that involved war with Mexico and the incorporation of half that nation's territory. Our economic and political power penetrates the entire non-Communist world, a new American empire, basing its control on neocolonial methods, having supplanted the hegemony of the European nations. The democratic and liberal self-image of our national ethos has deeply repressed these realities of our heritage. But revolutions in the third world and the stirrings of colonized populations in our own society have brought into the foreground a new consciousness of both domestic colonialism and empire abroad.

A focus on colonialism is essential for a theory that can integrate race and racial oppression into a larger view of American social structure. The colonial order in the modern world has been based on the dominance of white Westerners over non-Western people of color; racial oppression and the racial conflict to which it gives rise are endemic to it, much as class exploitation and conflict are fundamental to capitalist societies. Western colonialism brought into existence the present-day patterns of racial stratification; in the United States, as elsewhere, it was a colonial experience that generated the lineup of ethnic and racial division. Just as developing capitalism in Europe produced social classes out of a medley of rural and urban strata and status groups, the colonial system brought into being races, from an array of distinct tribes and ethnic peoples. It was European conquest and colonial wardship that created "the Indian," an identity irrelevant to men who lived their lives as Crow, Sioux, or Iroquois. And as a result of slavery the "Negro race" emerged from the heterogeneity of African ethnicity.

Yet the colonial perspective cannot by itself provide the theoretical framework necessary to grasp the complexities of race relations and social change in America. When the colonial model is transferred from the overseas situation to the United States without substantial alteration, it tends to miss the total structure, the context of advanced industrial capitalism

in which our racial arrangements are embedded—a context that produces group politics and social movements that differ markedly from the traditional colonial society. Not enough work has gone into elaborating the main dimensions of the overall context and pursuing their implications for the social transformations of the future.

The new theoretical model needed to analyze and interpret American society might be based on the combined existence, historical interaction, and mutual interpenetration of the colonial-racial and the capitalist class realities. For America is clearly a mixed society that might be termed colonial capitalist or racial capitalist. Neither the explanatory framework of colonial theory nor conventional Marxist models of capitalism can adequately capture the complexity and paradoxes of racial oppression in relation to other compelling social forces.