

Introduction

The dispute over affirmative action is whether there is a history or not.¹ Those in favor of affirmative action want programs to compensate for the effects of past discrimination in hiring, housing, admissions policies, and political involvement until participation patterns roughly equal demographic distribution, overcoming a white-only past that had extremely traumatic effects on those excluded. Those against affirmative action want questions of hiring, admissions, etc., decided on present merits. Or, to put it a different way, the supporters of affirmative action want the stories of those who have suffered discrimination to be heard; those against affirmative action do not want to hear the stories. The latter's opposition to attempts to rectify the past has been catastrophic in many ways, not the least of which was to halt the effort of the civil rights movement to end institutional racism. One effect was to render discussion difficult if not impossible because the two sides ended up speaking different languages, grounded on different narrativities. This was what the white supremacists within the anti-affirmative action movement wanted, but the absence of a shared discourse highlighted a dilemma that even supportive whites could not get past, an incomprehensibility about racism's centrality to popular white thinking.

The Paradoxes of Discrimination

After affirmative action laws were implemented in the 1970s, some opponents charged that the policies constituted "reverse discrimination," since a few white people were not hired or not admitted to schools in some places in order to give people of color employment or participation where they had been previously excluded. When those formerly excluded responded to these charges by trying to explain about past and present racial discrimination, they were accused of being "racist" for having brought up the issue of race. The terms "discrimination" and "racism" lost their meaning, applying both to a structure of oppression and to a resistance and struggle against it. The danger was that in the conceptual vacuum and personal disorientation this created, only raw power would have presence.²

The white response to affirmative action, in calling it “reverse discrimination,” which signified that white people were being discriminated against by minorities or their agents, carried the ethical implication that all discrimination was bad. On the face of it, as a purely ethical statement, in ideal circumstances, that is unexceptionable. But to ignore the question of what to do about past discrimination is unacceptable. To end past discrimination, those excluded by it must be included, and the obstructing deficits forced upon them by that past must be removed. From a democratic perspective, the monopoly on participation must be brought to an end. In a democratic context, in which avenues of participation should be guaranteed, any effects of historical discrimination which still bar participation would have to be eliminated. To diminish the white monopoly on social participation, and to dispel the inclusive control whites inherited from the past, the structures of discrimination would have to be dismantled, much as monopoly corporations were dismembered by antitrust legislation. Affirmative action laws attempt to do that.

The dismantling of the white monopoly may look like discrimination to those whose former control is brought to an end. But in the face of past discrimination, one either validates the crime by refusing to engage in de-monopolization, or one discriminates against the monopolizers to dissipate it. However, opponents argued that affirmative action ended their participation rather than their monopoly. By this shift in focus in calling the affirmative action project discriminatory, its opponents render the word “discrimination” meaningless and the issue undiscussable. If rectification is deemed as unjust as the injustice it is to remedy, then correction of the injustice becomes paralyzed, preserving the injustice; the claim to a superseding ethics perpetuates the unethical. To accept or give credence to the notion of “reverse discrimination” puts one in a double bind, able to go neither forward nor backward.

In other words, with the exclusion of history, the abstract political notion that all discrimination is bad becomes a dead-end street. The insistence on an abstract ethics leaves history out of the account; and the inclusion of that history renders an abstract ethics unethical. History and ethics get played against each other. Yet history and ethics are two inseparable dimensions of any consideration of justice. Under this double bind, justice becomes unthinkable.

This is a double bind into which racism places those whites who think discrimination is bad on ethical grounds. In order to oppose all discrimination as bad, they have to give some credence to the complaint of other whites that they are being discriminated against by affirmative action laws. Thus, they must become accessories to discrimination, either past or future, and their antidiscrimination project is turned against itself, rendered discriminatory. This is not a dilemma for black people, however, nor for Native Americans. For them, whites should just give up their monopoly and their need to control everything in the name of the democratic principles whites themselves advocate. Yet they too face a double bind. To call for an end to discrimination in the name of democratic principles means to put it to a vote, in which the majority wins. If the monopolizing majority (of whites) were willing to obey democratic principles, the question would not need to be voted on; democratic inclusion

would simply occur in the absence of active exclusions. If ending discrimination has to be put to a vote, it means the white majority is not willing to end it and will vote it down. In other words, to put the question of democratic principles to a vote means democratic principles have already lost.

When in California in 1998 a majority of white people, along with a small number of minority people, voted for a proposition that ended affirmative action in the name of ending all discrimination, they represented a broad spectrum of positions on the issue. Some actually opposed equality for minorities; others thought all discrimination was bad. Some condemned affirmative action as insulting to the self-respect of the formerly excluded by providing an institutional crutch (oddly assuming that because it was provided, one had to use it). The proposition turned the process of equalization against itself; in the name of equality, it restored a situation known for its inequality.

What clinched this paradoxical situation was its valorization by the courts. During the civil rights upheaval, the courts recognized the need for affirmative action. Once the affirmative action laws were in place, whites complained about reverse discrimination and sought to get the laws overturned in the courts, and later repealed by legislation. The government claimed that it was colorblind, operating without consideration of race, and this became its methodological principle. Yet that principle assumed the effects of past discrimination had been dispelled, and that such unanimity was indeed possible; that is, on the basis of the passage and implementation of laws, the history of discrimination was over.³ Yet the question of whether discriminatory structures were still in operation or not would seem to be a question of social investigation rather than juridical decision. To know this, the courts would have to hear the stories of racial oppression. But the exclusion of race from juridical discourse made that impermissible.

Furthermore, when the courts claim to be colorblind, to no longer recognize race, it is a way of saying that race does not exist—by definition, or fiat, or proclamation. Yet, to the extent that racial discrimination and segregation continue to exist in social reality, a blind eye or ear to that fact would contradict the court's decision. To ignore what still survives of the past is to preserve it. Thus, the courts are in a double bind. They must know the state of structural racial discrimination in order to make the decision they have, while they must make the decision they have in order not to be (reverse) discriminatory. To know if racial discrimination has been dismantled, they must listen to the stories of those who claim to be victims of racial discrimination, but the courts' claim to colorblindness means those stories are no longer admissible. Thus, in the name of antisegregation, the courts act to preserve the persistence of segregation, as told in the stories the court refuses to admit. Finally, those who seek justice against racial oppression are in a double bind; they are left without recourse. In engendering these double binds, those who favor racial segregation and oppression have brought the antisegregation process to a halt.

In every realm of social organization, the same problem is presented by racism to those who seek to confront and dispel it. They find themselves in a dead-end street, beset by an illogic that resists articulation, inverts ethics, rejects historical experience,

and turns political principle against itself. And none of it is new. In 1866, Andrew Johnson vetoed the first civil rights bill. It was a bill that granted citizenship and the vote to black people and guaranteed them the same rights to make contracts, own property, serve on juries, bear witness, with full benefit of law and responsibility as held for whites. It established that no state law could abridge those rights. In effect, the law proposed federal safeguards of citizenship for black people, mainly freed slaves, against state governments that might attempt, within their recently curtailed tradition of holding African Americans in bondage, to abridge those rights. In vetoing the bill, Johnson said that the bill did for the freed slave what the government had never done for white people, and in that sense discriminated against the white race.⁴ It was his, and the South's, way of saying that the United States owed the black freed slave nothing, neither payment for labor, nor citizenship, nor equality, and need take no special steps to provide those long withheld "inalienable rights," ignoring the fact (in a powerful act of amnesia) that the rights of whites already existed and had existed under original charter conditions, unbeset by an alien enslaving society. It was a way of using the fact that white people were the government, and that the government was white, to disguise that fact and bar others from inclusion in the same gesture.

Gerald Early (a black literature professor at Washington University) allegorized this inner paradox of white hegemony when he said, in speaking about Martin Luther King, that King was "a black leader in a society in which there are no white leaders." Recognition of King as a black leader signifies a white point of view that differentiated King from itself; it made a separation that no white leaders need undergo. In recognizing King, the white establishment assumed for itself the ability and power to grant such recognition, as a sign of status or special notice. It granted legitimacy, but in its own terms, from beyond King's relationship to his community. By exteriorizing him from itself, the white establishment relegated him only to his relation to his community. He is not a "leader" but a "black leader." At the same time, those granting legitimacy do not have to consider who they are in assuming that role. The legitimacy granted is assumed as part of white hegemony. That legitimacy thus belongs to the whites who grant it, rather than to King. The assumption of hegemony contained in the act of granting recognition thus withholds legitimacy as only its own to grant. The assumption of a hegemonic position from which to grant recognition thus withholds legitimacy and recognition in the very act of granting it, because it has appropriated that legitimacy as its own to grant.

This double gesture has long historical roots, going back to Jefferson himself, and the thinking of other "white" leaders of that time. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson reasons that the slaves should be freed, educated, sent back to Africa, and replaced by whites. Why carry black people to colonies elsewhere and not incorporate them into Virginia society? Jefferson says:

Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.

He compares the "beauty" of white women to black, and chooses white. To his expression of taste, he adds a generalizing psychology of the slave, speaking of a "them" that takes no account of their being slaves (as does the above quote), and thus speciates without species differences. He claims that "in memory they are equal to the whites," but inferior in reason or imagination. He goes on enumerating the accomplishments of white western society of which he declares black people to be incapable, such as poetry, mathematics, complex harmonies, or subtleties of sentiment, in short, all of the fineries of society made possible through the vast leisures and riches produced by working millions of people from dawn to dusk to support such an elite cultured style, without so much as a hint of gratitude. But in speaking of the improvement of "the blacks in body and mind," as opposed to their liberation (again in body and mind), he takes from them the very humanness he has granted and then found wanting in their circumstances.⁵ That is, he must assume an inherent equality in order to assert an inherent inequality. Their mere associations with whites, for Jefferson, should have been enough to instill them with cultured refinements, of which he sees no evidence (refusing to countenance an imagination of freedom), and he ignores the fact that he lives in a society that murders imaginative slaves, those who demonstrate the autonomy that imagination requires, on the excuse that they don't know their place. But then he adds, to cap his musings about black inferiority, that it hinges on color ("this unfortunate difference"), as "a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people." When he debates the question of emancipation, he divides the field among, on the one hand, "Many of their advocates [who] wish to vindicate the liberty of human nature . . .", and on the other, "Some of these [who are] embarrassed by the question 'What further is to be done with them?' . . .," as if these were polar positions subsuming the totality of the issue. In effect, he addresses only "their" advocates, and has these advocates respond with the same sense of "them" that characterizes his own thinking.

Jefferson demonstrates that the discussion about black people refuses to consider allowing black people to speak for themselves. The questions that pertain are to be decided by whites. Black people are to be denied entry into decisions that affect them, in order to accuse them of being incapable of entry, or inferior to participation. Denying black people entry into deliberations that concern them then constitutes limits that justify their denial of entry. Thus, power tells those in its power, "We know what is best for you." And oppression tells those it oppresses, "We know you better than you know yourselves" (as a variant of "We know you did it," that expresses the a priori criminalization at the foundation of lynch law or the witchburning Inquisition). Critical to these sentiments is not "what is best," nor the speaker's knowledge, but the "we," the power contained in that "we." It is the self-arrogated power to speak for another, which is always already discriminatory, exclusionary, and inferiorizing. When Jefferson speaks for the people he anthropologizes, he cannot help but make of them what his act of speaking for them makes them. Discrimination inherently speaks for those it discriminates against. Yet to speak for others in the name of a knowledge of them is at best an empty gesture, and at worst a wholly hypocritical act. It is a doubly duplicitous stance since the "we" is socially assumed by an individual in order

not to speak as one, and to refuse responsibility for what is spoken. The space between individual and institutional racism is filled by this “we” and its desire to discriminate without being pinned down. It jumps from one side to the other, escaping between noninvolvement and nonresponsibility, masking itself as both institutional and individual.

Jefferson concludes his meditation by naming the strings attached to freedom: “Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture.”

What is indeed unknown to history is the very notion of whiteness and the purity concept upon which Jefferson bases his arguments (unknown especially to the Romans), since that was invented in the very colony of which he was an ostensive leader. But in Jefferson’s own logic, he has to set black people on a categorical par with whites in order to make the notion of “inferiority” meaningful, so that he can argue for their inferiority, and thus justify their extreme and absolute separation from whites as categorically different.

Under the surface of Jefferson’s words is the final gesture of his thinking, the real reason for continuing slavery, withholding citizenship and franchise, instituting segregation, or sending emancipated slaves back to Africa. It is the problem of mastery, and the equation he cannot resist making between mastery and “purity.” The assumption of mastery lurks throughout his proto-anthropological discourse on African American limits, his “reluctant” conclusions about black inferiority, based upon a reasoning that confirms mastery at the beginning in order to discover and affirm mastery at the end. The need to exclude black people as inferior in order to conceptualize racial mastery becomes precisely what warrants his “reasoned” descriptions of inferiority. “Mastery” must grant humanity in the very act of withholding it, in order to constitute itself as mastery in the first place.

This circular mode of discursive operation, with its triple gesture, threads its way through U.S. jurisprudence. For instance, in the 1856 Dred Scott decision, Justice Taney argued that the U.S. government was a white government in order to resolve the dilemma between the existence of slavery and the principle that “all men are created equal.” Analyzing the history and tradition of citizenship in both colonial and U.S. society, he concluded that citizenship had been reserved only for native-born white people. Because native-born black people had previously been categorized as property, no citizenship was available to them. That is, black people could not escape their status as property through a claim to citizenship because the entire history of white settlement in America had considered them unable to make such a claim. It was immaterial to Taney that black people had been declared property or, if free, disfranchised by a society that had been overthrown. Taney’s primary argument was simply that, regardless of the universality with which the revolution proclaimed its ideals and principles, they remained germane only to white prerogatives. That is, white people had established universal principles for themselves in order to withhold them from uni-

versality as ideals and principles. They were to mean only what white men had established for themselves that they would mean. In Taney's reasoning, the white male view of "all men" meant only what white men had shown "all men" would mean through the hegemony granted by universalizing "all men." "All" meant "not all."

Though an old society had been overthrown in order for a new society to begin, the new society could begin only by resurrecting the old society within itself. The English exclusionary principle, ostensibly overthrown, was nevertheless to be the governing principle. And we return to the double bind. Here was a case of a chief justice of the Supreme Court reasoning in the name of social justice against all social justice, and seeing no need to differentiate with respect to the social inferiority of black people between a judicial position having been produced by a transformation of a former society, and that former society remaining untransformed and ever present in his judicial reasoning. Blacks seeking to appeal to law to throw off their oppression were caught in a double bind between property status as the source of social inferiority and social inferiority as the source of their property status. Taney codified that double bind into law. In the process, he made the surreal argument that a black person from a foreign country could be naturalized as a citizen, while a black person born in the United States could not because naturalization was not a relevant procedure for someone born in the United States. Thus, an Africa American was not a citizen because property, entrapped within that property status because not a citizen, and ineligible for naturalization out of either of those states because not an alien.

We confront a number of structures here, and it is important to understand what they mean. The double binds that we have encountered here are the traps, deceptions, and paradoxes into which racism leads those who oppose it, both white and black. The triple or triadic structure we have also encountered, with its circularities, is not just an extension of the double bind. It is part of the way racism constructs itself. It belongs to its inner mechanism, the manner in which it creates the double binds in which it traps those who oppose it. Something is granted, and withheld, and the act of doing the two things at the same time becomes both an expression of hegemony or power, and a direct reconstitution and rationalization (through a direct violation of one's own principles and basic assumptions) of that hegemony. This triple gesture, the withholding of legitimacy in the act of granting it as an appropriation of hegemony, is an act of power, or exclusion, or speaking for. These are thus different structures, operating at different levels of white supremacy. What is important to understand is that they are operative structures. They escape traditional logical systems or argument strategies.

In other words, to deal with racism, and to analyze it, we must think in terms of its structures, as a new form of thinking, beyond that of ordinary reasoning or logic. These structures perfuse and pervade the way in which racist thinking proceeds. Racism confounds attempts to use ordinary reasoning, or experience, or philosophical reasoning against it in argument because it obeys a different thought process. That means we must engage in a different kind of philosophical meditation. These structures are not stories whose unfolding we can follow; nor are they syllogisms or dialectics whose logical

validity we can investigate. As structures, their different elements relate not through a process of moving from one logical moment to another, but in a spatial kind of conceptual relation to each other. These structures beset us in the world, but they become discernible only through articulations of their operation that reveal them in form.⁶ When we can see these structures, it is because they appear in language—a language that appears to be “our” language—though as thought patterns that evade discourse because they evade traditional reasoning. That is why they call for new ways of thinking. If the sentences that describe racist thinking appear convoluted, it is because they are attempting to represent structures of (racist) thought that is itself convoluted, and whose convolutions appear only in the form of those sentences. It is this thought process, its historical origins and contemporary unfoldings, that we will attempt to approach through presentation of its structures in this book.

The same triple gesture characterizes the trajectory of affirmative action politics. Affirmative action programs were instituted to rectify centuries of exclusion and discrimination against large groups of people (rhetorically named “minorities” and “women”). Yet the institutions that promulgated these programs were the same institutions that sanctified and ratified the structures of exclusion and segregation throughout U.S. history. When they institutionally inscribed a recognition that discrimination had occurred, they were also withholding recognition that that discrimination remained at their own foundations as institutions—institutions through which that recognition had occurred. While the original structures of Jim Crow constituted an important dimension of governmental power and hegemony, the government’s actions, through their recognition and nonrecognition with respect to Jim Crow, reconstituted that hegemony and power in the civil rights era. Confronted with a movement of the oppressed, of black and brown people suing for equality and participation, the government listened briefly out of a memory of democracy. But in obedience to an instinct other than democratic, it stopped listening, and backed away from further listening, heeding instead the charge of “reverse discrimination” that accorded with its pre-civil rights involvement. In recognizing past discrimination, the government acceded to its being white; in not recognizing it was white, it returned to its whiteness, forgetting (in another powerful act of amnesia) that past discrimination had been an injustice that required rectification. That the government was white was itself a paradox, expressed in this double movement; and the anti-affirmative action movement, in charging reverse discrimination, deployed this paradox of the government’s whiteness against it—that is, in alliance with it, returning both to their positions of power and hegemony.

We see the inner workings of this triadic structure in the very notion of “reverse discrimination” itself. The charge of “reverse” discrimination added nothing to the issue. Affirmative action was not an exclusion of previous excluders (white people), neither in the name of a real political inclusion of black and brown people, nor in the name of encompassing democratic principles. If whites felt excluded by the equalization process of affirmative action, it was not in their existence as whites, but in their ability to exclude (that is, their hegemonic power). In other words, the exclusion they

felt, as the historical excluders, was not of themselves but of their ability to actively continue to exclude. It was on this basis that the inclusion of the formerly excluded was rejected by whites as exclusionary, while their own re-exclusionary act of rejection was seen as inclusive (of themselves). This implies that whites who felt excluded (or victimized) by antidiscrimination measures would feel included only in their former role as excluders. Because whites were not included as excluders, with the ability to be discriminatory, they were therefore (in their own eyes) excluded as whites.

Here again, the triadic gesture recognizes the equalization process and disrecognizes it at the same time by appropriating it for the purposes of its own inability to cede power. In the actual debates on affirmative action, this triadic structure appeared as the false issue of quotas. The concept of quotas was familiar to whites in the sense that Jim Crow had established a quota system that was 100 percent white. The issue of affirmative action quotas in the anti-affirmative action arguments curtailed the ability to review the original history that was to be rectified, an absolute quota system. The quota argument rendered prior forms of discrimination by whites nonexistent—as nonexistent as “white leaders.” Moreover, it provided the terms in which whites could adopt a stance of being victimized. It authorized the claim of victimization, and the resurrection of supremacy, by appropriating the civil rights project in order to reject it. Just as “all men” did not mean “all” for Justice Taney, “equality” did not mean “equality for all” for the opponents of affirmative action.

There is something sad and undignified when members of the white hegemonic majority go to court complaining of victimization, reverse discrimination, or racial oppression—undignified not because they should be more noble in their still assumed superiority, but because they should have recognized that their very assumption of superiority and historical hegemony (all but forgotten in the complaint) had already foreclosed any possibility of nobleness. Claiming to be a “victim” of a movement for equality seems unintelligible. Yet this sense of being a victim also has deep historical roots.

According to Bernard Bailyn, there is a strange syndrome in U.S. political thinking that considers it more subversive to “upset the apple cart” in favor of democratic principles than to leave undemocratic procedures intact as the status quo. That is, stasis is valorized over acting on the substance of issues if the latter leads to political contestation.⁷ When the American colonists fought against the king, it was because the king appeared subversive to them in his use of unbridled power. His taxes and trade policies created hardships that led to urban mob upheavals of the poor and a threat of social chaos. To bring tranquillity back to colonial society, the elite acted against the king. It was not power they objected to but the sociopolitical upset produced by the king’s policies. For instance, when Virginia and Carolina sought to curtail the slave trade in 1769 to maintain the capital values of the slave population, which were threatened at that time by oversupply, the king’s veto threw their finances into turmoil. Thus, the revolutionaries did not see themselves as subversive, but as preservers of social values. Similarly, the police today are not seen as oppressive or subversive of freedom when suppressing political movements (Selma, Kent State, etc.) because they are standing as a line of defense against those creating

upheaval, or upsetting the status quo. Affirmative action, regardless of how necessary its operations might be toward democratizing U.S. politics, or establishing a fundamental equality, was considered wholly subversive. It was in those terms that the demand for equal participation was seen as an intent to take over and dominate society.

Immersed in these paradoxes and a priori arguments, the meaning of racism gets lost in unrecognizable multiplicities. The resulting unintelligibility of the concept—the reliance of individual actions on institutional meanings, and institutional actions on individual sentiments—is the secret of its tenacity. Unintelligibility does not make a problem go away; indeed, it enhances a social problem's tenacity, while its tenacity enhances its unintelligibility.

Today, against the dents made in white supremacy by the civil rights movements, the nation slowly reconfigures a system of racial discrimination. The police arrest a disproportionate number of black and brown men, which they legitimize based on suspect profiles, though those profiles are constructed from their own statistics. Black people are routinely charged with felonies for crimes that are considered misdemeanors for whites.⁸ Longer sentences are given black and brown people in court; for instance, ghetto-targeted drugs like crack draw longer sentences than the powder cocaine used primarily by the white middle class. Four times the number of black men as white go to death row for only a proportional number of murders. Housing and loan discrimination, redlining by banks, and job promotion disparities favoring whites over blacks persist. White people fight for the survival of their purity in survivalist societies and fortress (gated) communities based on political attacks against blacks who attack nothing.⁹

In other words, the reconstruction of white hegemony goes beyond countermanding a democratic demand. But let us look briefly at what is being countermanded by the processes that are reconfiguring racial discrimination.

The Paradoxes of Antidiscrimination Movements

Four major trends of antidiscrimination inscribed themselves into U.S. politics during the civil rights era, two white and two not white. African Americans took the lead in confronting the white supremacist structure, establishing a tradition of oppositional cultural thought that brought the concepts of identity and cultural autonomy into common political parlance. In its wake, there rapidly grew movements of Chicano/Latino consciousness and a Native American traditionalism that made varying land claims based on pre-colonial and treaty sovereignty. These latter two movements harkened back to a cultural past and sought to recuperate certain foundational mythologies that had been appropriated by white conquest to serve as ingredients of its mainstream "American" identity. All three saw themselves as in some sense liberation movements against the internal colonialism of white supremacy. Though their respective forms of "nationalism" differed according to varying political contexts, they were alike in being incommensurable with what Euro-American tradition under-

stood as nationalism. The internal “nationalism” of U.S. “minorities” was neither power oriented (in the sense of seeking to take over a government) nor secessionist, but land oriented: land as a place of being rather than as property. Each invoked a conceptual relation to the land and to the continent as a cultural consciousness. For Native Americans, land constituted sacred space, the place of cultural autonomy; for Chicanos, the land was ancestral, granted by the first liberation of a nation from Spanish colonialism, before its usurpation by the United States in the Southwest; for African Americans, the land meant a claim to respect and recognition as being at the center of American society, the source (in the bodies and labor of African slaves) of its wealth and its historical survival.

Such movements are always seen by hegemony as disruptive, regardless of the ethical or democratic nature of their goals. As Simone de Beauvoir says, when oppression condemns a group of people to “mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the [overlord] collectivity,” they have only one option, and that is to deny the tranquility of the *socius* from which they have been excluded.¹⁰ Fanon adds that, whatever the nature or justice of their challenge, it will be seen by the elite it confronts, in an inverted double bind, as either terrorism or insanity.¹¹ These movements are not the focus of this book. However, they highlight and contextualize many aspects of what we will be looking at.

The two major white antidiscrimination movements have been the Marxist and the humanist or liberal. Humanism and liberalism address the effects of white supremacist discrimination and call for inclusion of people of color at all levels of social participation. As active ideological formations in all arenas of civil rights based on all people being free and equal, they push for authentic guarantees of democratic participation. They argue with the personal prejudices of whites that effectively constitute the daily operations of racial discrimination, and they seek to defeat them through reason.

Yet the irony of Euro-American humanism is that it succumbs to the unspeakable double bind that we have discussed. Positing a concept of the universal human—which it derives from eighteenth-century liberalism’s uprising against the arbitrary social stratifications and superiorities of medieval feudalism—humanism produces for itself a standard or norm as the measure of human being. The universalized human it produces, however, and exhibits as a standard, derives from European society; it understands itself and its normativity as white. Europeans find themselves thereby empowered to judge others, and to abjure those who don’t measure up. The universal human, by suppressing its recognition of differences, concretely devalues what differs. In their humanist insistence on universality, Europeans became exclusionary. In effect, Euro-American humanism incorporated white supremacy and the white racialized identity incumbent upon it.

For humanism, the generalization of humanity to a European standard, and the exclusion from that standard of those categorized as inferior (or inferiorized as categories), were part of a political program. It sought to “raise the level” of “those” people victimized by colonialism and racism, to alleviate the effects of their oppression

or their assumed “natural” inferiority. Its universalism blinded it to its complicity with the situation it sought to assuage, and to its stance as a white hegemonic stance. Its own notion of the political, and of the state, hid this from itself. The humanist concept of the state is not just that governmental structures are a social contract, or that the state is constructed by people to govern their affairs in the fairest fashion. The “social contract” of Rousseau does not occur in a vacuum but in a European landscape. While its mythic origin is a state of nature, its real origin, its historical parentage, is the specifically European feudal system, which did not obtain in other parts of the world. In the process of deriving a solution to their problem of medievalism, Europeans decided they had derived the solution to everyone else’s medieval problem, whether it existed or not.

Ironically, Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762) was wholly contemporary with Linnaeus’s system of taxonomic classification and Buffon’s treatise on natural history, which marked the first steps toward a theorization of racial biology. Political humanism and the white biological theorization of race appeared during the same quarter century, authored by men belonging to the same generation of European thinkers; that is, they occurred in tandem and conditioned each other culturally. While one established the “human” as an ideological standard for itself, the other hierarchized that standard within and against its pretense to universality. In other words, humanism differed from white supremacy only in what the human standard was to be, and what it was designed to accomplish. Neither questioned the social role of universality as such, nor of a universal standard, nor its necessity to set limits, to exclude what might de-universalize it by being different. In leaving unquestioned the idea of having a standard in the first place, neither humanism nor the theories of racial biology wholly dispensed with the medievalism they had contested as worldview.

Marxism takes a different tack toward racism. For Marxism, society and all social processes are to be analyzed on a class basis. In particular, class politics were to bring the industrial working class to an awareness of its historical task of finally eliminating social classes altogether by overthrowing capitalism. In Europe, because capitalism functioned across national boundaries at will, Marx called for an international conjunction of working-class efforts. To this idea, the national chauvinism of workers from different countries became an obstacle. Working-class politics more naturally developed on a national basis, and Marx’s “internationalism” has always been a programmatic idea rather than a “natural” emanation of working-class experience. In the United States, racism was addressed in an analogous fashion. Slavery and segregation were understood as problems of class struggle. The focus was on the growing industrial working class, exploited and impoverished in its own right. On that basis, Marxism posited racism as a capitalist tactic to divide the working class by turning white workers against black people in general, distracting them from organizing and realizing their objective class interests. This view has had greatest currency for the twentieth-century labor movement, particularly in industrial union organizing. Against white racism, Jim Crow, and union segregation inherited from the nineteenth century, Marxism described black workers as a “super-exploited” sector of the work-

ing class with whom to make common cause in class organizing. The corollary to this, however, was that civil rights and black liberation movements were to be seen as adjuncts to the labor movement.

Unfortunately, by pushing the issue of racism into the mold of class relationships, Marxism ignored the profundity and the complexity of the processes of racialization in the United States. The easy programmatic of Marxism have not worked, and the tenacity of white racism has remained incomprehensible. While labor history provides examples of black and white workers uniting in union organizing campaigns prior to the civil rights movement, they are the exceptions. For the most part, white workers refused multiracial organization, choosing economic deprivation rather than join black workers in a common effort. Marxism could not see that a cultural identity such as white supremacy could not be addressed through programmatic. It has to be understood as a social structure. For that, class analysis is insufficient.

The Marxists were right, of course, that racism was a means of dividing people in order to better dominate them, whether as classes or communities, or as an electorate. But to leave that as an element of theoretical understanding is to avoid the question of why it works so well. The central question rarely asked and never fully addressed was from what social foundation, and on what cultural structures, did racism grow, and on what foundation did capitalism rely in its use of racism. Where did racism and white supremacy get the power and tenacity to so consistently supersede the alleged strength of class interest and of the class programmatic?

On the other hand, suppose race and class are not as separable as the “divide and conquer” paradigm would imply, and that class is as dependent on structures of racialization in the United States as it is on nation and nationality in Europe. (By *racialization*, I mean the way race is produced and bestowed on people by institutional social actions, and not simply as a condition found in people as their racial category. Racialization means that race is something people do, rather than what they are.) It is possible that Marxism does not look long and hard at race because it might find that the foundations of class relations in the United States are different from those in Europe; that would undermine the notion of class and class structure as being primary to political event and process. Or worse, Marxism might find itself to be in some sense a racialized (white) ideology.

This point has been made by a number of black thinkers. Cedric Robinson, for instance, argues that black radicalism has largely gone unnoticed by Marxism because it did not follow the organizational forms or promulgate programmatic goals familiar to Marxism from its European origins. Robinson extends the notion of black resistance and radicalism to include mutinies aboard slave ships, the collective suicides of those enslaved, the Quilombos, Palenques, Maroon and Seminole communities of runaway slaves, and the many “terminals” of the Underground Railroad. Black radicalism embraces what DuBois called the largest general strike up to that time when, during the Civil War, millions of slaves left the plantations and moved overtly and covertly to the Union army lines (BR, 57)—though in so saying, DuBois is perhaps only metaphorically acceding to a Marxist language; flight from

the place of slavery reveals a mode of psychic survival very different from a traditional strike. This difference re-expresses itself in the present through a variety of alternate antiracist organizational forms: national liberation movements, the mass civil rights actions that shook the United States to its foundations, and the cultural movements of the many third-world communities inside the United States. In other words, black resistance to slavery and segregation cannot be understood through a few recognizable uprisings such as those of Gabriel or Nat Turner. Even the polite and respectable petition for redress, for release, for freedom, for the franchise, and for a sense of humanity were aspects of black resistance; indeed, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the existence of such petitions was routinely used as a reason to refuse them by white state governing bodies, precisely because they represented organized black opinion and expression.¹² The underground black churches that formed in the midst of slavery later flourished and played a significant role in attempting to stem the tide of Jim Crow as it rose in the wake of Reconstruction—and still later formed a core network for civil rights actions in the 1950s. All this is today being recognized as manifesting a tradition which had been left out of the account by European categories of resistance.¹³

In these terms, Robinson addresses Marxism as a European construction whose view of itself as world-historical partakes of a certain European conceit (CR, 2). It presents its Eurocentric historiography as the necessary developmental process other cultures must undergo. That is, it conceptualizes historical development in terms of a European template. For instance, Marx supported British economic domination of India, with all the suffering that entailed, because it “advanced” India toward a capitalism from which a working class could emerge that would make possible a classless society. This assumed that the Indian people, or the Indian working classes, needed developed capitalism (à la Europe) to take India closer to classlessness. Like bourgeois European historiography, it saw other traditions as backward or primitive in order to see its own as advanced or superior. In other words, Marx used the European trajectory, interpreted his own way, as a standard to measure the historical stage other countries had attained in terms of social structure. By requiring developed capitalism as the foundation for Indian or any other liberation, Marx established European working-class consciousness as the world-historical form. In effect, Marx made assumptions similar to European colonialism’s, and his argument becomes a rationalization for imperialism.

As Robinson puts it, all this relieves “European Marxists from the obligation of investigating the profound effects of culture and historical experience” on social and economic processes (CR, 2). While eighteenth-century imperial white supremacy and social racialization could never emerge as a developmental possibility for other colonized cultures, those cultures were nevertheless analyzed and narrativized by both Marxism and colonialism as subordinate cultures that required industrialization, both to escape white supremacy and its colonialism and, by abjured implication, to duplicate it. In that sense, even for Marx, the answer to European colonialism for the colonized was to become their own colonialism.

The colorblindness in Marxism's self-universalization is a white colorblindness. Marx's theorization of primitive accumulation is a case in point. Marx labels capitalism's ostensible first step toward accumulation of capital as "primitive" accumulation in order to differentiate it from the ongoing accumulation process that is capitalism's driving force. It occurs in the form of the expropriation of the independent peasantry in Scotland and England, and thus as an internal affair in sixteenth-century British economics.¹⁴ But Marx leaves out that it also relied on early colonialism, and the despoliation of new areas (Africa and the Americas) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The British began their industrialization in large part with shipping, and developed their shipping industry through the enormous profits to be made in the slave trade. The slave trade laid the basis for industrialization in Liverpool, London, and Birmingham, as well as in New England.¹⁵ The plantations in the Americas then provided a form of mass production also at high profit. Thus, the slave trade and plantation slavery both served to kickstart capitalism's operations. In noting this, Oliver Cox argues that what Marx posits as the beginning of the capitalist system was already only its normal functioning, and primitive accumulation is in reality ordinary capitalist accumulation as the theft of labor.¹⁶

For Robinson, white Marxism leaves its own implicit racialization as white out of the account, rendering racism and the struggle against it an adjunct to the class struggle. It creates a hiatus between itself and black radical thinking, and Marxism's self-universalization becomes its own implicit self-deracialization—that is, it ignores its own racialized character. To the extent Marxism considers class politics and class ideology above race and color, and thus colorblind, it misreads black radical, anticolonialist, and antiracist thinking as well as its own.

Charles Mills raises the same question in his book, *The Racial Contract*. For Mills, the "racial contract" is an actual though tacit and unwritten, thoroughly methodological agreement "between members of one subset of humans" designated by various "racial" criteria as "white" to "categorize the remaining subset of humans as 'non-white.'"¹⁷ It is a contract to which all whites are beneficiaries and principles, and to which no nonwhites are "consenting parties" as the objects of the agreement. Mills argues that the various theories of liberal state organization from Locke to Marx all function within this racial contract; that is, they concern the "white state." For Mills, Marx ensconced himself in the whiteness of his own critique of the capitalist state by never venturing into a critique of slavery as it functioned in the capitalist world from the dawn of colonialism onward (RC, 94). He further asserts that an alternative (to the liberal and Marxist accounts of the state) is needed once the existence of the racial contract is recognized (RC, 82).

Anticolonialism and Marxist Theory

Robinson, Mills, Cox, DuBois, and other writers on black radicalism are all part of a broader critique of European humanism that emerged in its fullest form in the thinking

of national liberation movements in Africa. Following World War II, with the image of Nazism looming behind European society, African anticolonial movements began re-analyzing the bases of European culture. They called in question its humanism by counterposing their own experience with Euro-American colonialism. Embracing aspects of their own traditional thinking, not as below standard but as other than the pretended white western standard, anticolonial theorists from many areas of the third world deconstructed Euro-American pretensions to universality and the project of discovering universals in the first place.¹⁸ The realization that European humanism was neither generalizable to all people, nor that humanism would prevent the extreme dehumanizations of which Europe and its capitalism were capable, imparted a new sense of cultural and political sovereignty to anticolonialist politics and cultures. A general critique of the foundations of white western philosophy and its place in the world emerged. From that basis, the universal human, the western notion of consciousness and subjectivity, and the industrial foundation of culture were rearticulated as the effects of imposed power rather than of natural social superiority.

In the United States, black radical movements (followed swiftly by Native American and Latino) embraced the new ideas and questions emanating from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In their several ways, they threw themselves against the cultural structure that had racialized and ostracized them. The combined efforts of people on all continents to dismantle the structures of oppression everywhere during the 1960s made that period internationally spectacular. Anticolonial liberation and civil rights movements fought against forms of oppression that differed from the class relations Marx had described, and in fact contained and defined those relations. New modes of organizing and oppositional action, new modes of critique of the nature of oppression, new modes of contesting the power of hierarchy, racism, or colonialism emerged everywhere. They reflected the ways that national liberation revolution implied a change in global class relations. Power was no longer seen simply as aligned in struggle across the means of production, as in Marx's paradigm, but now across national and continental boundaries—struggles between cultures took the form of struggles between national formations, though they often got articulated as struggles between classes in a colonialist context.

For Marx, class relations were fundamental, and a critique of their fundamentality would appear unintelligible. But class-oriented thinking distorted the counter-hegemonic focus of African, Native American, and Afro-American thinkers.¹⁹ The propensity to understand African "nationalism" on the European model is an example. In European eyes, the anticolonialist movements for national sovereignty seemed to embrace a familiar sense of nationalism, though that was in part an artifact of how Europe articulated their politics to itself. Some national liberation movements understood themselves through alternate forms of political autonomy, however, and their thinking was more in terms of a "land question" rather than state power.

The "land question," beyond the categories of both colonialism and anticolonialism, is a question of how to live on the land socially, cooperatively, collectively, rather than through its commodification or the eminent domain of the nation state. As an

alternative to capitalism, rather than in confrontation with it, the land question posed a concept of national liberation that did not fit the European notion of nationalism. In many pre-colonized areas, the marketing of land as a commodity for profit had been anathema. Liberation movements from Guatemala to Congo to Laos sought to abandon land commodification in order to retrieve an ability to live the land rather than live off it. In the process, rural movements of farmers brought themselves to prominence as armies of cultural liberation and land reform. In the writings of Zamora Machel of Mozambique, or Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau, the literature of Achebe of Nigeria or Ngugi of Kenya, these questions are broached and critiqued. While these movements called themselves nationalist, as a reference to the territory they sought to reclaim from European colonial definition, what they envisioned was a cultural retransformation. This did not mean abandoning all commodity production or technology, but it meant establishing a relation to the land, and to the planet, that was incommensurable with the European model of national governance.

On the other hand, European and American capitalism strove to construct nation states with which they could do business. Colonialism has always functioned by invading an indigenous local economy and dissolving it through commodification and the formation of overriding markets. From the sixteenth century to the present, in the African, Asian, and American colonies, starvation and proletarianization were produced among masses of people by disrupting their relation to the land and the local land economy that supported them. Commodification of land left whole areas destitute, and that condition met capitalism's needs.²⁰ Military power has always been thrown not only against popular organization but against antiuniversalist thinking and indigenous cultural traditions. Contemporary Euro-American colonialism, however, attempts to denature national liberation movements by deploying the power of commodification against them. Revolutions have been culturally defeated by negotiating a European form of independence that compromised the land question in favor of European models of political organization and economic production. European and U.S. support for military dictators and corrupt bureaucracies in Africa and Latin America defeated the cultural concept of sovereignty and acted against the logic of socialization of the nation's resources. The latest form of Euro-American colonialism is the Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the IMF through coerced loans.²¹ Debt has long been a traditional means of subordination of the impoverished by the rich.

Unfortunately, European Marxists and radicals too often translated third-world nationalism into terms of western thought and philosophy, and then saw the anti-colonialist movements as backward, as bourgeois or reactionary because nationalist. They often accused such movements of having fallen short of understanding the class categories of the nation state and state power. In prioritizing the European sense of the nation state, they became ideologically complicit with capitalism in suppressing alternate or indigenous forms of political organization, and sometimes complicit in practice through misunderstanding, nonsupport, or uncritical accession to the role of commodification. Capitalism always found plenty of colonized people who would accept the promise of wealth and promulgate a form of independence that did not

provide real autonomy or sovereignty. Those who sought sovereignty through alternatives to that form of corruption fought not only armies, but the rhetoric of western philosophy, the UN, and too often western radical thinking as well.

It is with this complex process of anticolonialism as a background that Cedric Robinson levies an extensive critique of Marxism. He begins by pointing out that Marx regarded black slavery as simply an economic category rather than as labor productive of value. In a letter of 1846, Marx explains that slave labor is to be considered a factor of production like machinery or credit (CR, 105). He recognizes that the “triangle trade” did more than simply encourage British industry because the profit rate from the slave trade was the highest of any Atlantic industry. Beyond providing the stimulus for industrialization, that profit made from the body of the African slave constituted the very body of capital for investment. But for Marx to reduce the Africans to the status of “factor of production” means withholding from them the humanity that, as laborers, would produce surplus value. It is not amenable to Marxist historiography to consider slavery productive of surplus value if slavery is already relegated to a pre-capitalist form. Marx in effect primitivizes the slave system and the slave (in unfortunate conjunction with the western economy’s “creation of the negro”) by categorizing the African not as a source of accumulation but as part of the very capital accumulated.

Robinson criticizes Marxist historiography by showing that slave and feudal forms of labor coexisted in Europe during the medieval period at the dawn of capitalism, which imparts an indistinctness to Marx’s categories of labor (CR, 12). That indistinctness then undermines the idea that slave labor and wage labor are in opposition and could not both function as value producing. Robinson cites DuBois as understanding that “American slavery was a subsystem of world capitalism” (CR, 281). He adds, wryly, that “it is difficult to understand how capitalism might ‘create’ precapitalist forms of labor” (CR, 136, n48).

What is at stake here is not the mode of exploitation in which slave labor is to be considered, but the racialization of the Marxian framework that makes the distinctions it does. Robinson suggests that the socioeconomic structure around the body of the African slave as both wealth and labor—that is, as person, object, cargo, commodity, accumulated capital, real estate value, source of hyper-profit, labor, and producer of surplus value all at once—is too complex for Marxism to incorporate (CR, 153ff). Moreover, Marx’s reduction of the African slave to the level of a “factor of production” only occurs because of a single absence from the above list, that of “consumer.”²² It is as non-consumer that the slave ceases to be a human laborer in the Marxian ontology of production. But if the item of non-consumption is all that stands between the categories of slavery and wage labor, then it is not a distinction that can be made clear simply on an economic basis. White wage workers, for instance, do not lose their value-producing capacity for Marx when forced to “purchase” their goods at a company store with scrip, yet African slaves lose theirs, though the weekly provisions given them on a plantation function similarly, without the intermediary of scrip. In effect, the distinction appears racial rather than economic.

The fact that Marxism categorizes labor forms differently in the face of an historiographic indistinctness marks, for Robinson, a real “colorblindness.” The problem it raises is whether this colorblindness is different from that of contemporary U.S. jurisprudence. Since its inception in nineteenth-century class struggles, socialism has considered class to be without color. Socialism assures us that it seeks to liberate all the oppressed in its march toward classless society. But does that mean a mode of liberation decided upon by the oppressed, or a mode of liberation previously decided for them? This becomes a dire question when we remember that in the nineteenth century, many socialists (like Fourier) were also rabidly anti-Semitic. To ontologically devalue the African slave through an ostensibly structural disparity signifies that Marxism has made no provision for the slave’s personal integrity (CR, 173ff). For Robinson, the personal integrity of the kidnapped and enslaved African (as a person from a culture, with a past, with its own philosophies, undergoing present suffering and responding in complex ways to dislocation, etc.) becomes an element that neither the slaveholders, nor industrial capital, nor Marxist economy could grant credence of being.

Inverting Marx, W.E.B. DuBois considered slavery to be the real archetype of capitalism insofar as the extremity of capitalist exploitation of labor is exposed in raw form. Slavery revealed the extent to which that exploitation will go for commodity production, as well as the dimension of force that underlies it. In these terms, DuBois considered white workers to be petty-bourgeois because in white society whiteness constituted a property that they could cash in, as a specific privilege and advantage (BR, 17). Against this, as coerced labor, black workers constitute the archetype of working-class proletarianization, rather than an element of a precapitalist formation (CR, 323).

For Richard Wright, on the other hand, Marxism itself is petty-bourgeois because it diminishes the importance of black proletarianization as well as the fascist nature of white society. Wright argues that white supremacy reveals a populist mode of operation with respect to black people that is congruent to the fascist petty-bourgeois populisms of Europe (CR, 432). Marxism isn’t fascist, for Wright, but it doesn’t admit to the larger contextualization of class relations or its own concepts of class distinction that he sees emerging from the history of racialization in the United States. In blurring the distinction between racialization and class relations, Marxism reduces racialization to relative privilege. But the concept of social privilege signified by the proletarianization of black workers against the nonproletarianization of white is not something that Marxism can grasp critically. In its white-oriented way of distinguishing between white workers and black, it reduces its own concept of race-class relations to an economist one.

In general, Robinson agrees with Wright that Marxism is insufficiently radical to get to the racialized core of the capitalist order in the United States, or to recognize the forms of oppression that emerge from that core (CR, 451). He agrees with DuBois that Marxism is not a “total theory of liberation” yet retains a certain usefulness for analyzing questions of class formations and class oppression in white society. That

is, Marxism can serve as a grammar for articulating the alienation of people and the degradation of production workers in capitalist society (CR, 416). While Robinson understands its attractions, its “alternative mapping” of history, its intellectual and confrontational power, its “identification with the underclasses,” and “its promise of a hidden truth,” in his view Marxism remains limited insofar as it is unable to conceive of itself as racialized—that is, as white.

The Structure of Racialization

For both humanism and Marxism, then, the paradoxical attitudes of the white hegemonic mind re-assert themselves within their efforts at antiracism. The central double bind into which much white antiracism gets trapped is thinking the source is the effect and the effect is the source. Without questioning or dismantling their own hegemonic relations to black or brown people, humanism and Marxism fail as modes of antiracism. The form that failure takes is an inability to read and engage the alternate projects of black thinkers, or to understand what disables those projects from entering into dialogue with the cultural foundations of U.S. society. Through that nonengagement, Marxism and humanism remain complicit with the silencing of those projects inherent in white supremacy.

How racism can be such a potent force against liberatory thinking, such a tenacious tool for the sculpting of political amnesia, consensus, and triple thinking, becomes a central question. Unless they critique their own white hegemony, antiracist whites fall into the same triadic trap of granting equality in order to withhold it, under the assumption of their self-defined hegemonic role in struggling against inequality. What makes the triadic conditions of white hegemony work? Though these structures express themselves clearly on the surface of U.S. history, they clothe reason in irrationality, and irrationality in reason, camouflaging themselves so that, even when whites look at them, they do not see them, or know what they are seeing. The double bind, for antiracist whites, lies in the fact that one cannot see racism if one simply looks at its effects, at the prejudices and privileges of one side and the harassments and impoverishments heaped on the other. The effects must be the reason one looks, but one must look more deeply into racism’s histories, institutions, and identity structures to see where those triadic structures and double binds come from.

Two ideas must be clarified before we begin this investigation. The first is the idea of race, and the second is what we are referring to when we use the term “white” with respect to an institution, as in understanding the government or the law as “white.”

The first thing to understand about “race” is that it does not refer to something internal or inherent in people. To be inherent in a person, race would have to be biological, and enough has been argued over the whole twentieth century concerning its nonbiological character. But let us go over the main points. Race would first of all reveal an objective homogeneity across different cultures. Yet different cultures define race differently, and hierarchize racialized groups in different ways. Brazil and Mex-