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Abstract: In this theoretical analysis of US racism, we examine contributions and deficiencies of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's influential racial formation theory from the critical perspective of systemic racism theory. Analysing important concepts and arguments in both theoretical frameworks, we demonstrate that racial formation theory inadequately explains: racial meanings and white racial framing; US society's racial foundation; the US state and other sites of racial contestation; whites' and white elites' centrality in contemporary racism; challenges to a racially pluralistic democracy; and group resistance to racism, especially that of the black 'radical' intellectual tradition. We find racial formation theory provides some innovative concepts that move beyond outdated mainstream ethnicity/assimilation theories, but that formation theory lacks the conceptual tools for fully understanding the deep foundation, layered complexities, and institutionalized operations of systemic racism in the USA. [ABSTRACT FROM PUBLISHER]

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Rethinking racial formation theory: a systemic racism critique.

In this theoretical analysis of US racism, we examine contributions and deficiencies of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's influential racial formation theory from the critical perspective of systemic racism theory. Analysing important concepts and arguments in both theoretical frameworks, we demonstrate that racial formation theory inadequately explains: racial meanings and white racial framing; US society's racial foundation; the US state and other sites of racial contestation; whites' and white elites' centrality in contemporary racism; challenges to a racially pluralistic democracy; and group resistance to racism, especially that of the black 'radical' intellectual tradition. We find racial formation theory provides some innovative concepts that move beyond outdated mainstream ethnicity/assimilation theories, but that formation theory lacks the conceptual tools for fully understanding the deep foundation, layered complexities, and institutionalized operations of systemic racism in the USA.

Keywords: systemic racism; racial formation; race theory; (US) race relations; racial hierarchy; racial conflict

Introduction

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory stands as one of the most influential contemporary theories of racial and ethnic matters in the social sciences, one that often moves to the centre of theoretical analysis of racial matters. 'Racial formation' is 'the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' in societies like the USA (Omi and Winant [67], p. 55). Many social science and humanities scholars have used aspects of formation theory in examining such matters as 'race' and contemporary evangelical movements (Alumkal [2]), historical struggles among 'whites' and Mexicans (Gomez [48]), race and language issues (Nguyen [65]), and race and popular culture (Brock [11]).[1]

Nonetheless, this innovative theoretical model is inadequate for explaining the magnitude of racial oppression in the USA. While recognizing the usefulness of elements of Omi and Winant's theory, we identify serious deficiencies in their concepts and demonstrate where they fall short of providing an adequate compass for understanding the power, stability and perpetuation of racial oppression. As an alternative framework to racial formation theory, we present systemic racism theory, a social science theory of race and racism that elucidates the foundational, enveloping and persisting structures, mechanisms and operations of racial oppression that have fundamentally shaped the USA past and present.

Our discussion of systemic racism theory here explicates and extends key theoretical dimensions of Joe Feagin's sociological analyses of systemic racism ([36], 2006) and the white racial frame (2010a, 2010b). Our elaboration of systemic racism theory responds in part to Omi and Winant's critique ([69]) of Feagin's systemic

racism approach (2006), offers a nuanced counter-critique, and aims to spark renewed debate over the meaning of 'race' and over how US racial relations are actually structured. Like Omi and Winant, we focus on racial matters within US society. We do not have the space to present a more complete analysis of the internationally situated US racial state and overseas imperialism, explore similarities between US society's racial dynamics and those of US empire, or address global-level racial structures. Yet, as we show in other work, systemic racism theory provides empirically grounded and theoretical guidance to understand racial realities beyond the USA and in comparative perspective. [2]

Our analysis begins by identifying the strengths of racial formation theory and then provides an overview of essential arguments in systemic racism theory. After summarizing the two positions, we contrast racial formation theory with systemic racism theory on important sociohistorical dimensions and theoretical points. Through this comparative analysis, we demonstrate that systemic racism theory provides a more realistic, adequate conceptualization of racial meanings, race relations and racism in US society than racial formation theory.

What is racial formation theory? A brief overview

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant ([67]) provide analyses of the ethnicity/assimilation, class/stratification and nation/colonialism approaches to explicating 'race' in the USA. They criticize the first two paradigms for downplaying racial matters, and the third for 'essentializing' race in a manner that questions 'identity politics' and denies improved 'racial democracy'. In their work (hereafter, *Racial Formation*) they show that 'race' cannot be reduced to ethnicity or class, but instead is an 'autonomous field of social conflict, political organization and cultural/ideological meaning' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 48). Omi and Winant have played an important role in steering mainstream social science away from still-dominant ethnicity/assimilation theories to a perspective emphasizing the primary role of 'racial formations'. In an era of increasing post-racial and race-peripheral perspectives, formation theory's assertion of the centrality of racial matters has been welcome.

In developing racial formation theory (hereafter, formation theory), Omi and Winant offer several influential concepts for explaining race and racism, especially 'racial formation' and 'racial projects'. Racial formation is conceptualized as the sociohistorical creation of racial meanings in an array of racial arrangements and examines how those arrangements are developed and transformed. Racial projects are viewed as competing sociopolitical contestations occurring among different racial-ethnic groups. While we will critically assess the meaning and use of these concepts, we do find them, in part, useful in explaining certain aspects of racial oppression in the USA.

In their explication of 'race' as a concept, Omi and Winant ([67], p. 54) avoid what they describe as the two pitfalls: to 'think of race as an essence' or 'as a mere illusion'. In contrast to theories that essentialize or discount race, formation theory describes race primarily as a 'social construction', one historically flexible and politically contested. Race exists as an unstable and de-centred complex of 'social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle' (1994, p. 55). Race is understood as a variable 'concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies', one 'constructed and transformed sociohistorically through competing political projects' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 71).

More recently, Winant ([91], p. 182; see also 2001, p. 369n) reiterates this central point that the racial formation approach perceives 'the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested'. Winant ([92], p. 369n) explains how contested meanings are linked to projects and formation: (1) racial formation is 'the intersection/conflict of racial "projects" that combine representational/discursive elements with structural/instrumental ones'; and (2) 'iterative sequences of interpretations ("articulations") of

the meaning of race that are open to many types of agency, from the individual to the organizational, from the local to the global.'

For a racial project to be 'racist', it must create 'structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 71). The USA is historically suffused with these contesting projects – with competing racial interpretations shaping society. Indeed, racial formation is a kind of 'synthesis, an outcome, of the interaction of racial projects on a society-wide level' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 60). The variety of projects encompass 'public action, state activities, and interpretations of racial conditions in artistic, journalistic, or academic fora, as well as the seemingly infinite number of judgments and practices we carry out at the level of individual experience' (Omi and Winant [67], pp. 60–1). Their concept of the neo-liberal racial project utilized by conservative Americans since the 1980s, with its often more subtle racist language, advances our understanding by helping to explain development of 'colourblindness' and 'post-racial' perspectives (Bonilla-Silva [8]).

Racial formation theory centrally emphasizes the state's role in shaping racial meaning and realities; the state (political arrangements and government structure broadly conceived) is the 'preeminent – though by no means only – site of racial contestation' (Omi and Winant [67], p. viii). Racial projects politically and legally reorganize the state. They argue that the 1960s US civil rights movements had a massive transformative impact that dismantled the segregationist US state, forcing profound, large-scale societal change and producing a much more racially democratic state (Omi and Winant [67], p. 117).

In formation theory, racial categories and meanings play an 'enduring role' in relation to social ordering and are central 'in organizing social inequalities of various sorts, in shaping the very geography of American life, in framing political initiatives and state action' (Omi and Winant [67], p. vii). Omi and Winant ([67], p. 158) state:

Race is present in every institution, every relationship, every individual. This is the case not only for the way society is organized – spatially, culturally, in terms of stratification, etc. – but also for our perceptions and understandings of personal experience.

Formation theory's observation of the centrality of racial matters in US politics and culture and its view that they 'will always be at the center' (1994, p. 5) of US society are well supported by social science research.

Other formation theory concepts, especially 'racial dictatorship', 'racial democracy' and 'racial rule', are interrelated and best understood in their associations. 'Racial rule' involves an 'historical process which has moved from dictatorship to democracy, from domination to hegemony' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 67). Omi and Winant make a distinction between the present 'racial consent' through 'hegemony' and 'racial democracy', on one hand, and the past 'racial domination' and 'coercion', and 'racial dictatorship', on the other. They argue that through changing racial formations, US society has shifted from one defined by a racial dictatorship (slavery, segregation) to a much less Draconian society defined by a 'racial democracy' whose structures and practices are rooted in significant consent from less-powerful racial groups and hegemonic control over those groups by powerful racial groups. For Omi and Winant ([67], pp. 66–9), through political power struggles of racial groups within the USA, the concepts and formations of race have shifted very significantly, and in the course of sociohistorical transformations the politics of 'racial totalitarianism' has been replaced by a politics of 'racial democracy'. While they clearly recognize racial inequality, they view contemporary racial relationships and discourse as 'enormously' different from the recent Jim Crow segregation past.

Because Omi and Winant ([67]) perceive great political and other societal transformation over time in US racial formations, they explicitly reject addressing the ongoing, past-like 'institutional component of racism' (1994, p.

70), a rigid and well-established racial hierarchy, and the powerful, long-lasting racist ideologies and racial meanings imposed by 'racial rulers' throughout all US history. Viewing the USA as still rigidly divided and institutionally racist is misguided, for this view makes it 'difficult to see how the democratization of US society could be achieved' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 70). Conceptual phrases like 'institutional racism' and 'systemic racism' do not appear in *Racial Formation*, nor do theoretical analyses of social scientists who elaborated institutional and systemic racism concepts in the 1960s and 1970s (Ture and Hamilton [83]; Knowles and Prewitt [58]; Feagin [35]; Feagin and Benokraitis [40]; Feagin and Feagin [41]).

Racial Formation (Omi and Winant [67], p. 157) concludes with the strong claim that the extensively racist:

legacy of the past – of conquest, racial dictatorship and exclusion – may no longer weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living, but it still lingers like a hangover or a sleepless night that has left us badly out of sorts.

This metaphorical conclusion strongly suggests that the centuries-old, heavy legacy of an extraordinarily racist past is significantly declining and now much less important in contemporary societal impacts on African American and other Americans of colour.

What is systemic racism theory? A brief overview

Drawing substantially on many black counter-system analysts (e.g. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Ture, Derrick Bell, Joyce Ladner), the systemic racism theory discussed here also builds on Joe Feagin's and numerous colleagues' decades of conceptual and empirical field research on US racial matters. Some of Feagin's relevant books include *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (Feagin 2010b); *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (Feagin [37]) and *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (Feagin [38]). These works, and other important work with former students (e.g. Picca and Feagin [72]; Chou and Feagin [14]) and colleagues (e.g. Feagin and Feagin [41]; Feagin and Sikes [42]; Feagin and Vera [43]; St Jean and Feagin [76]), provide detailed historical accounts and extensive empirical examinations of US racial oppression, and provide contextual frameworks of institutional and systemic racism. Systemic racism theory presents a substantial theoretical explanation of US racial dynamics, one that rests heavily on explicit historical and empirical accounting of the realities, framing and impacts of US systemic racism.

The concept of 'systemic racism' (Feagin and Feagin [41], pp. 19–37; Feagin [37]) refers to the foundational, large-scale and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression devised and maintained by whites and directed at people of colour.[3] Systemic racism is a 'material, social, and ideological reality that is well-embedded in major US institutions' (Feagin [37], p. 2). Racial oppression is *foundational* to and deeply ingrained in US history and is operational throughout societal levels – group relations, institutions, organizations, power structures. From its inception, racial oppression has been fundamentally materialistic and has involved an aggressively hierarchical ordering of racial groups and, consequently, asymmetrical racial group organization with regard to power and resources. Systemic racism has routinely reproduced major societal institutions and networks that uphold asymmetrically structured material and social-psychological relations among racial groups. In systemic racism theory, the past and present racial hierarchy and perpetuation of unequal socio-economic power relations among different racial groups are viewed as endemic to a race-based social system involving much more than conceptual meanings, ideologies and biased actions. In the case of US society, systemic racism is foundational to and engineered into its major institutions and organizations.

US legal and political institutions have a long history of establishing racist laws and policies that actively segregated and subordinated racial groups on many levels (Davis and Graham [21]; Feagin [37]; Lopez [62];

Bell [6]). The US Constitution and early and later US Supreme Court cases operated to create and sanction a slave society and then a Jim Crow society that denied rights, opportunities and citizenship to people of African, Asian and Latin American descent. As critical race legal theorists demonstrate (Bell [5]), recent conservative political policies and legal rulings continue to legally or informally uphold segregated realities for whites and racial minorities.

In the social history of white Americans' interrelations with Americans of colour, systemic racism has been a foundational and complex reality and included: (1) the many exploitative and discriminatory practices perpetrated by whites; (2) the unjustly gained resources and power for whites institutionalized in the still-dominant racial hierarchy; (3) the maintenance of major material and other resource inequalities by white-controlled and well-institutionalized social reproduction mechanisms; and (4) the many racial prejudices, stereotypes, images, narratives, emotions, interpretations and narratives of the dominant 'white racial frame' designed to rationalize and implement persisting racial oppression (Feagin and Vera [43]; Feagin 2010a, 2010b).

For example, systemic racist attitudes and negative depictions of people of colour by whites persist. Like Hollywood's first blockbuster, *The Birth of a Nation*, contemporary films, as well as advertising, television news, newspapers and other media outlets – and even the social sciences – continue to be mostly white controlled and regularly pathologize and dehumanize people of colour, yet repeatedly exalt whites (Stanfield [79]; Vera and Gordon [84]; Morris [64]; Cortese [18]). Extreme to subtle racist attitudes about African Americans, Latino/a Americans and Asian Americans are prevalent among white Americans today, regularly emerging in the public front- and back-stage performances of contemporary elite and ordinary white Americans (Picca and Feagin [72]).

Throughout systemic racism's centuries-long development in the USA, a powerful worldview, a white racial frame, has been strongly established by whites. The dominant white frame is materially and ideationally embodied and was created to rationalize and buttress the oppressive hierarchy and related societal structures of systemic racism. The white frame is socially constructed, a meta-structure shaping and pervading not only the 'state' but also the 'economy' and 'civil society'. It involves much more than individual racial prejudices and discrimination – the conventional concepts of mainstream social science. For centuries the pervasive white frame has shaped and protected US society's extremely inegalitarian structure of resources and hierarchy of power established by and for whites, particularly elite whites (Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Feagin [39]). As much field research indicates (Feagin and Sikes [42]; Bonilla-Silva [9]; Feagin [38]), the white racial frame – affecting individuals, groups and societal institutions over centuries – directly and indirectly permeates every major feature of US society today in a way that is far from being routinely flexible and dramatically weakened in a progressive direction, as Omi and Winant ([67]) suggest.

Conceptualizing a white racial frame also positions white agents, especially elite whites, explicitly at the forefront of discussion of racial oppression (Feagin and O'Brien 2003). Too often, conventional analysts use abstracting language of 'society', 'state' or 'racism' that obscures whites' directive and ongoing role in the above practices and structures. In general, mainstream and racial formation analysts neglect thoroughly and systematically studying the actual white architects and promoters of the USA's systemic racism.

As previously suggested, systemic racism theory is inspired by and draws heavily on significant aspects of what Omi and Winant ([67]) call the black 'radical' tradition. In our view this tradition includes such pivotal theorists as W. E. B. Du Bois, Oliver C. Cox, Mary Francis Berry, Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Kwame Ture, George Fredrickson, bell hooks, Robert Staples, Cheikh Diop, Joyce Ladner, Nell Painter, Wilson Moses, Molefi

Asante, Michael Eric Dyson and Michelle Alexander, to name only a few. Despite the diversity of their social thought, these are analysts who regularly offer strong critiques of institutional and structural racism from a *counter-system* perspective, an approach to societal analysis that formation theory largely neglects or rejects. The counter-system analysts above are part of a robust lineage of black social theorists accurately explicating racial meanings, social-psychological dimensions of racialized relations, and the power and structural realities of racism.

The long tradition of critical black social thinkers and other critical analysts of colour has influenced what in legal studies is called critical race theory (CRT). Analysts of colour in this tradition, such as the aforementioned Derrick Bell, Michelle Alexander and Patricia Williams, as well as Ian Lopez, Richard Delgado, Angela Harris, Kimberlé Crenshaw and others, have used a structural-racism perspective to discern US legal institutions and demonstrate ways in which these institutions support a larger racist social system (Delgado and Stefancic [22]). Systemic racism theory draws heavily on older critical black social thought and also on more recent CRT insights (e.g. 'property interest in whiteness' and 'racial realism') in developing conceptualizations of the white racial frame and systemic racism. Systemic racism theory shares CRT's 'racial realism' that questions the alleged progress of race-based human rights and claims of substantial advances toward racial equality in the USA. For example, like most US civil rights and politico-legal 'victories' regarding race, the famous 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board*, ostensibly calling for racial equality in educational opportunities, represented more of a symbolic than a structural victory:

The Brown decision failed to remove ... barriers [based on race]. The hopes that it would do so have been replaced by a reluctant recognition that it unintentionally replaced overt barriers with less obvious but equally obstructive new ones. (Bell [5], p. 197)

Whites' centrality in societal racism

A central problem with Omi and Winant's ([67]) explication of formation theory is that it provides only circuitous or vaguely implied analysis of whites' dominant role in creating and perpetuating the material realities of racial oppression, inegalitarian racial hierarchies and white-framed interpretations of racial matters. No critical and explicit discussion of whites as a racial group shaping and maintaining the racial oppression and dynamics central to US society appears in their book. Almost nowhere in *Racial Formation* do Omi and Winant present explicit and needed descriptive terms like 'whites', 'white Americans', 'European Americans' and/or 'Americans of European descent', and most especially in regard to determinative practices shaping the structures of racism. Systemic racism theory defines and systematically analyses in related field research both 'whites' and 'elite whites' as necessary units of empirical and theoretical analysis (Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Picca and Feagin [72]). An adequate theory of US racial matters is impossible without forthright discussion of these dominant groups. Since USA's founding, whites have been the most powerful, resource-laden, socially, politically and economically influential US racial group.

As Omi and Winant ([67]) show, racial identities have for centuries been imposed through strict US laws and state regulations. However, also important in shaping identities are white-imposed community norms; scientific and medical categorizations; residential, educational or occupational segregation; and the racial images and ideologies of the media, popular culture and science (Smedley [75]). Self-chosen and mixed-race categories, which have the potential to weaken the white racial frame's stereotypes and related notions, are often overlooked or discouraged by whites; rather, placing people into the old, fixed system of racial classification is often encouraged (Chou and Feagin [14]). The 'one-drop rule', which was once legally enforced and persists informally to this day, is one example of the USA's rigid racial categorization. While supportive of people who defy racial categorization, systemic racism analysts recognize that society's racial rulers, elite white men, work

hard to uphold these categories and divisions among racial groups. In an effort to maintain power, whites aware of the benefits of 'white privilege' and the 'property interest in whiteness' expand the logic and legitimization of an asymmetrically arranged, inegalitarian racial group divide.

Like other colour-coded terminology, 'whites' is a philosophically problematic term, particularly with regard to multiraciality and intersectionality, yet the term is sociologically important because of the way it is routinely utilized, most especially by self-defined whites, to identify a dominant US racial group and reinforce racially coded societal organization. US society, like many western societies, socially distinguishes and racially divides – scientifically, politically, legally, economically, culturally and ontologically – people according to perceived skin colour and other singled-out physical characteristics. Today, fields like genetics, sociobiology and biotechnology focus on 'charting' the DNA and genetic differences and predispositions of racial groups. These are human knowledge systems where racial differences are periodically associated with supposed 'biologic traits'. Whites' (mis)framing of racial differences and (mis)accounting of mental and physical 'capacities' of different racial groups continue to (mis)inform certain 'scientific' fields (Gottfredson [49]; [4] Herrnstein and Murray [52]; Jensen [54]; Watson [86]; Cliquet [15]) and also provide justifications for racially unequal societal arrangements.

In their brief explicit mentioning of whites, Omi and Winant ([67], p. 59) write:

We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed we become disoriented when they do not. The black banker harassed by police while walking in casual clothes through his own well-off neighborhood, the Latino or white kid rapping in perfect Afro patois, the unending faux pas committed by whites who assume that the non-white colleagues are less qualified persons hired to fulfill affirmative action guidelines, indeed the whole gamut of racial stereotypes...

Omi and Winant ([67], p. 70) also state: 'Whites tend to locate racism in color consciousness and find its absence color-blindness.' In this very brief discussion of whites' role in shaping racial matters, they address whites' racial views and micro-level questions about racial identity. Yet they do not provide a significant and explicit discussion of whites' central and powerful role in shaping the racial hierarchy and the dominant beliefs, practices, social institutions and larger US social structures.

In addition, the ambiguity of their terminology, such as 'the state', obscures activities of the mostly white (male) decision-makers who control the US political economy. According to Omi and Winant ([67], p. 139), 'racially based movements were, by the 1970s, largely outmaneuvered by the new racial state which had responded to moderate demands and marginalized radical ones.' If, by 'new racial state' they mean the new white political power elite-controlled governmental, policy-making structure, we agree. Yet by failing to highlight and consider this extraordinarily important point about a white-controlled racial power structure and its biased mechanisms, racial formation theory's discussion of the racial state is significantly weakened. Such obscuring is commonplace, and helps to disguise and maintain whites' institutionalized power (see Frankenberg [44]; Royster [74]; Wingfield and Feagin [93]).

Like most mainstream social science analysts, Omi and Winant do not explicitly name and place whites, especially *elite* whites, in the action position of critical sentences (for example, as society's power brokers) when analysing racial formation or racial projects. They thus neglect a significant discussion of whites as a socially and historically powerful racial group that have dominated US racial projects and formations for hundreds of years. In contrast, systemic racism analysts delineate and examine exactly who, in the US case, the racial 'rulers' and 'ruled' typically are: whites, especially white elites, being the former group, and most African Americans and other people of colour, the latter group. We do not have space here to address

intersectionality issues, but systemic racism theorists recognize the importance of the intersectionality of race, class, gender and other important group categorizations/affiliations. An intersectionalist approach is necessary in examining ways that whites of different backgrounds possess different types of racialized power, as well as in examining the intersecting social inequalities/contexts/identities and diverse responses of those targeted by racial and other forms of oppression.[5]

One revealing bias in much contemporary social science and humanities analysis of US history is that, while ordinary whites are depicted as racially prejudiced and discriminatory, actions of elite white actors (e.g. capitalists, politicians and military, religious, intellectual leaders) who have greatly shaped US structures of racial oppression are rarely called out conceptually and discussed systematically (Feagin and Vera [43]; Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Feagin [37], [39]). When social scientists do imply or note elite figures, they typically soften language or code it abstractly ('society discriminates'), rather than thoroughly discussing realities of white elites' extensive actions in generating and propping up the racist system (see e.g. Wiencek [87], p. 7, pp. 356–7). Indeed, much social science research on racial inequality, divisions and discrimination is funded by the white elite and thus often produces uncritical methods and 'knowledge' sustaining systemic racism (Stanfield [78], [79]; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva [98]).

Throughout modern US history, dominant white actors have largely shaped the prevailing meanings of race, organized hierarchical racial relations, and promoted dominant racist ideas and practices that structurally shaped US society. This well-documented societal history (Woodward [94], [95], [96]; Stamp [77]; Williams [88]; Brown [12]; Jordan [55]; Stanfield [78]; Du Bois [25], 1996a, 1996b, 2003; Frederickson [45]; Lauren [60]; Feagin [37], 2010a; Connell [17]; Stanfield [80]; Elias [33]), implicating white elites and their supportive white publics in the USA, demonstrates the ways in which whites as a racial group have maintained exploitative practices directed against people of colour and preserved their socio-economic interests and societal dominion to the present.

Also missing in *Racial Formation* is a substantial discussion of US society's still-dominant racial hierarchy, running from dominant white-skinned Americans at the top to dominated darker-skinned Americans at the bottom. Throughout their major book Omi and Winant ([67]) use the word 'hierarchy' only once in regard to US racial issues, and then in passing. Most importantly, nowhere do they substantially and critically dissect the historical and contemporary development of the persisting structural reality of US society's racial group order. They do not provide the necessary discussion of the continuing, dominant and substantial white material interests and advantages over against the racial group interests and disadvantages of people of colour, as reflected in this hierarchical system of oppression. Systemic racism analysts accept the key point that for centuries this imposed hierarchy, one that structures social institutions, has been routinely perpetuated by a *broad societal reproduction process* that generates recurring patterns of oppression, including a divisive, racialized, social relationship between oppressed and oppressors. Whites as individuals and as a group are strong stakeholders in a centuries-old oppressive hierarchical structure of opportunities, wealth and privileges. Because of the systemic colour line, it is part of the historical and structural reality of being positioned as 'white' to be part of the oppressor, privileged class. It is also part of the reality of being positioned as 'not white' to negotiate and resist white oppression (Ladner [59]; Staples [81]).

Omi and Winant often seem to view white racism today as something tacked onto an otherwise healthy, progressing US democracy. In reading *Racial Formation* one gets the impression that in many situations contemporary whites now constitute just one racial group among many other relatively co-equal groups contending today in a horizontally arranged plurality that exists on an increasingly level playing field. They argue that 'whites can at times be victims of racism – by other whites or nonwhites' (Omi and Winant [67], p.

73). According to their pluralistic presentation of the main contemporary racial formation, whites should thus *not* be viewed as 'the racist group' or the one primarily determinative of contemporary 'racism' in this sense. They question: 'Is all racism the same, or is there a distinction between white and non-white versions of racism?' Their reply: 'We have little patience with the argument that racism is solely a white problem, or even a "white disease".' They state matter-of-factly that 'there is nothing inherently white about racism' (Omi and Winant [67], pp. 72–3).

They suggest here that racism today is mainly or substantially about individual prejudices and discriminatory actions, and not principally about centuries-old larger structures of whites' racial domination. They often use 'racism' in this non-structural sense, linking it primarily to racial prejudice, stereotyping or bigoted discrimination. For example, some black power advocates (see below) are seen as examples of 'racism'. They contrast the 'black supremacy' of controversial black scholar Leonard Jeffries with the 'white supremacy' of racist extremists like Tom Metzger (Omi and Winant [67], p. 73). While clearly recognizing that white supremacy is much more 'menacing' than 'black supremacy', they identify both as an 'instance of racism', a move that ignores the dramatic and institutionalized power inequalities between whites and people of colour.

Here, as elsewhere, they neglect a serious discussion of US racism's racially ordered social networks and macro-scale institutions and organizations generated or maintained by white power elites, overseen by white supervisors/managers (middle-class whites) and maintained by white labourers (working-class whites), as well as by people of colour who knowingly or unknowingly collude in the operation of systemic racism. Indeed, at no point do Omi and Winant analyse and deconstruct the important term 'racism'. Apparently, the modern concept of 'racism' was first extensively developed and named in a 1933 book of that title by German Jewish scholar Magnus Hirschfeld. He analysed scientific racists' notions about biologically determined 'races'. As Hirschfeld (1973/[53], pp. 35–99, pp. 266–318) assessed it, German Nazis translated an extensive racist ideology 'from theory into practice... with a ruthless consistency'. In its original conceptualization, thus, 'racism' meant far more than racial bias, for it involved a broad racist framing with a developed racist ideology closely coupled with *well-institutionalized* discriminatory practices, including institutionalized structures for elimination of racial groups. However, in the US context, the few scholars who made early use of this new concept of racism failed to adopt Hirschfeld's more structural meaning and, instead, largely conceptualized racism as individual prejudice and discrimination. Many scholars since have continued in this practice of playing up individual prejudice and bias and downplaying the structural and institutional meaning of racism (see Elias [33]).

Omi and Winant's failure to foreground and thoroughly analyse whites' primary role in originally creating and constantly maintaining the US system of racial oppression, and their avoidance of a significant and explicit discussion of whites' active, determinative and continuing position as racial oppressors and exploiters, severely weakens formation theory's ability to sociologically conceptualize a systemically racist country like the USA. Building on critical perspectives of African American analysts, and other analysts of colour, and drawing on much field research data on white racism, contemporary systemic racism theory argues that whites as a racial group have played the primary role in generating and shaping the still dramatically inegalitarian, hierarchical and unjust relationships among North American racial groups.

A one-sided emphasis on 'meanings of race'

There are substantial differences in racial formation theory's and systemic racism theory's approach to the meanings of 'race'. Like other contemporary analysts in the USA and elsewhere (e.g. Miles [63]; Gilroy [46]), Omi and Winant place too-heavy an emphasis on the ideological construction of race and on formation of racial meanings and identities (Bonilla-Silva [8], p. 31, pp. 51–4). They are centrally concerned with 'how concepts of race are created and change' and the ways that 'concepts of race shape both identities and institutions' (Omi

and Winant [67], p. vii). In their actual analysis of racial projects, however, they often accent struggles over racial meanings more than struggles over racially ordered institutional structures, power networks and material inequality of resources, even though part of their technical definition of racial projects recognizes racial rulers' efforts to 'reorganize and redistribute resources' (Omi and Winant [67], p. 56, [68]).

While 'race' is indeed socially constructed, the empirical realities of the racial social-historical world, past and present, are not adequately represented with this heavy emphasis on contending racial meanings. Indeed, these meanings reflect the tangible reality of materially oppressive racial structures. The central issue that in our view should be addressed is what racial group wins these (often fixed) contests over concrete resources most of the time, and what racial group, fundamentally and usually, has the power to impose most central racial meanings and structures of oppression on less-powerful racial groups. Systemic racism theorists emphasize the actual social structures, material conditions, knowledge and everyday practices and experiences of racial oppression generated by white Americans, as well as the hierarchical organization of racial groups and the worldview-conceptualizing and rationalizing of these structures, racial meanings and material reality that are part of the dominant white racial frame (Feagin and Vera [43]; Feagin [37]).

Systemic racism theory explores ongoing interrelationships among racially framed meanings, racial practices, racial hierarchy, and racial power networks and structures created and maintained by whites. This position contrasts with racial formation theory, which: (1) fails to provide a detailed and substantial discussion of the continuing hierarchical organization and power differences among US racial groups; and (2) generally focuses upon racial meanings over racial structures. Omi and Winant ([67]) discuss how racial meanings generally influence structures, but mostly fail to detail how racial structures (especially beyond the state) in turn socially generate and reproduce these racial meanings. This failure to consider in some depth how racial meanings and racial structures reciprocally and intimately interconnect in this racist society further weakens their theory. Since they do not analyse contemporary white-racist domination and power in serious detail, their concept of 'racial projects', although appearing to link racial meaning and structure, falls far short of explaining the realities of systemic racism. While systemic racism theory also illustrates how racial meanings shape structures, it diverges theoretically from formation theory in that it assertively foregrounds the many ways that white-controlled material conditions and white-dominated structures (*and powerful white actors therein*) constantly generate, reproduce and utilize pervasive racial meanings and understandings central to the dominant white racial frame.

Racial conflicts and racial projects: more than the state

As several scholars have noted (Bonilla-Silva [7], [8]; Wingfield and Feagin [93]), one serious limitation of Omi and Winant's theory of race and racism is its too-heavy a focus on the US state. Recall that the state is 'the preeminent site' of racial conflicts (Omi and Winant [67], p. viii). Like formation theory, systemic racism theory strongly supports the idea that the state is an important site of racial contestation and conflict in countries like the USA. However, unlike Omi and Winant's portrait of the contemporary state as a facilitator of racial democracy and mediator of racial conflict, we perceive a more repressive, white-controlled and white-interest-oriented modern state that regularly generates racial conflict, enforces racial divisions, and attempts to exploit, exclude or eliminate certain racial groups through homogenizing or marginalizing processes (Goldberg [47]).

Systemic racism theory argues that racial group relations and institutional racism are best understood multidimensionally – that is, not focused merely on the state and politics. While necessary for understanding some important forms of conflict, racial formation's heavy emphasis on the state provides too limited a conceptual framework, neglecting major areas of contestation in economic, cultural, psychological and epistemological realms. Racial oppression, conflict and contested meanings are also discovered by

researchers in the family, sports and entertainment, educational systems and the media – radio, cable television, internet, newspapers, film and music (Feagin [39]). Omi and Winant ([67]) occasionally note connections between political realities and other social-economic spheres, but these connections are not adequately foregrounded and theorized.

In addition, the US state has far too imbalanced a historical racial past and contemporary present – one created and controlled by, and chronically favouring, white racial oppressors – to be portrayed as a site providing anything close to a fair playing field for serious political contestations and resolving conflicts among racial groups. Whites' continuing dominance over the US political system is a major reason why patterns and meanings of racial oppression are reproduced so powerfully by the state, and also why that state is a pre-eminent site of racial conflict, but not exactly in the way that Omi and Winant argue.

Researchers provide numerous historical and contemporary examples of revolts and other active resistance by racially subordinated Americans *against* this white-dominated state (Ture and Hamilton [83]; Klinkner and Smith [57]; Feagin [39]). People of colour have struggled against enslavers, segregationists, and contemporary discriminators given sanctuary or employed by the white-controlled state. Indeed, a centrally potent site of racial conflict outside the state has long involved civic protest, educational campaigns and reform movements of African Americans. Racial conflict in the US economy is seen in many labour disputes between white and black workers over the last century. Racial inequality and conflict are nowhere more apparent than in the major economic divide and unequal economic competition between white workers and workers of colour – mostly one-way economic exploitation or domination of workers of colour by mostly white owners, employers, union officials and advantaged white workers (Du Bois [25], [28], [29], [30]). As in the antebellum period leading to the American Civil War, US society today continues to be rigidly divided between a white ownership class and a lower working class composed substantially of workers of colour.

From the beginning, racial conflict has also been impactful in US cultural, epistemological and social-psychological realms. For example, ideas and social knowledge provide a major site for racial contestation (Elias [31]; Stanfield [79]; Steinberg [82]; Stanfield [80]). Over the last several decades, numerous social scientists of colour (Ladner [59]; Staples [81]; Washington and Cunnigen [85]; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008) have argued that much contemporary knowledge is racially coded and organized and that those who hold much racialized power (mostly whites) dictate prized and dominant forms of knowledge, while often marginalizing the critical knowledge (such as that shaping much systemic racism analysis) that is generated by people of colour.

The impact of racial conflict is also socio-psychological (Du Bois [26], [27]; Bowser and Hunt [10]; Dennis [23], [24]; Chou and Feagin [14]). While Omi and Winant ([67], p. 59) discuss very briefly the impact of racial projects at the micro-social level of experience, they do not develop this important point. Systemic racism theory addresses both the everyday micro-social level of racialized experiences – for example the 'microaggressions' experienced daily by people of colour (Williams [89]; Feagin and Sikes [42]; Wu [97]; Feagin [37]) – and the macro-level racist social structures that shape the everyday world (Feagin and Vera [43]; Bonilla-Silva [7]; Feagin [37]).

Problems with formation theory's conceptualizations of racial 'democracy'

Omi and Winant ([67]) argue that US society has seen, and still sees, multiple and contending racial projects and periodically re-articulated racial formations. Formation theory presents a pluralistic and 'democratic' understanding of contemporary US society in which a diversity of racial groups use their significant resources to vie for power in numerous organizational arenas associated with politics and the state. The multiple racial

projects of diverse groups operate to secure political voicing and rights through a process viewed as ever changing in basic ways and relatively democratic and pluralistic in the inclusive sense. Consequently, formation theory proposes both a pluralistic understanding of 'race' (competing meanings of race and its significance) and a pluralistic understanding of racial relations (various projects of racial groups democratically pursuing their political agendas).

While important in terms of influences on state policies, these multiple racial projects are by no means of equal significance in the past or present. Broadly speaking, we observe in historical and contemporary US data two primary racial projects: that of whites who seek to maintain their exploitation, oppression and domination of groups of colour, and that of people of colour who constantly battle uphill to overcome oppressive and systemic racism. The latter struggles can be seen in the 'radical' black social-intellectual and political tradition, anti-colonial ideologies and struggles of groups of colour, and diverse practices of resistance by people of colour (and some whites) who have opposed white colonialists, enslavers and other white oppressors.

Systemic racism theory counters formation theory's optimistic claims of increasingly democratic contending racial projects and even more progressive racial formations with a theory of persisting racial oppression and hierarchy that explicitly identifies the main contemporary oppressors as whites and the main oppressed groups as people of colour. In the USA, the major racial formation, today as in the past, takes the form of a white-controlled economic, political and cultural system of oppression directed at people of colour, with a still clear-cut hierarchical relationship. White elites' power and resources trickle down to and enrich non-elite whites, who are on average able to secure better-paying jobs and other material benefits than most groups of colour (Feagin [39]). US whites, as a racial group, share much racial group power and 'property interest in whiteness', even if to significantly different degrees.

Formation theory often views US pluralism in political and governmental terms and, in certain respects, has correspondences to the pluralist tradition of Robert Dahl and others (Dahl [19]; Polsby [73]; Dahl [20]; Lindblom [61]), social scientists who mostly avoid examining how societal power is disproportionately controlled by certain racial and class groups. Pluralists suggest that contemporary society is an open field of competing societal groups, a plurality of groups that have more or less equal access to important political-economic resources. What pluralist political scientists and Omi and Winant offer is a relatively idealist model for perceiving contemporary socio-racial group relationships and a hypothetical vision of racial democracy. This is a portrait of racial group relationships as becoming relatively egalitarian in direction, one unrealistic in understanding actual asymmetrical power dynamics of racial group relations today (Hacker [50]; Feagin and Vera [43]; Bonilla-Silva [7]; Oliver and Shapiro [66]; Bush [13]).

We view past and present racial group relations as far from effectively pluralistic or now relatively democratic. In contrast to the pluralistic sociopolitical ideal, systemic racism theory, like CRT (see Bell [5]), outlines a realistic picture of a persistent and still greatly unequal hierarchy of racial group relationships (Feagin [37]). Whites in power establish oppressive systems of racial relations and group exploitation as a means of disempowering people of colour, including concerted actions by white actors disallowing actual democratic-pluralistic realities inside and outside the political system (Feagin [39]; Wingfield and Feagin [93]). The most common 'racial projects' of white oppressors involve maintaining systemic oppression as a means of enrichment. What might be termed the 'dominant racial project of the modern period' has involved the widespread, highly developed process – structuring and restructuring – of white socio-economic domination of people of colour. In opposition to the dominant racial projects of whites, counter-framed resistance projects of the oppressed – people of colour – often involve a range of alternative social views and actions, particularly resistance acts and much theoretical counter-framing to white-imposed racism (Ladner [59]; Staples [81]; Elias

[31], 2009d; Feagin [38]). Interestingly, Omi and Winant ([67], p. 66) do make one fleeting reference to a 'master racial project', possibly hinting at the dominant white project identified above, but this concept is left undeveloped.

The 'great transformation' or persistence of foundational racism

Anchored in modernist beliefs of progress and pluralism, formation theory presents a relatively optimistic view of racial progress, especially over the last half century (Omi and Winant [70], p. 498). Omi and Winant ([67]) argue that US racism is not nearly the ideological racial force and oppressive formation it used to be. They emphasize a great 'historical flexibility of racial meanings and categories' (1994, p. 4) and 'race as an unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle' (1994, p. 55). And they assume that societal 'understanding of the significance of race, and the way race structures society, has changed *enormously* over time' ([67], p. 61, emphasis added).

Omi and Winant ([67], p. 67) argue that a great social-historical transformation in racial politics and related realities has occurred since the Second World War, one replacing racial totalitarianism with significant democracy: 'Racial rule can be understood as a slow and uneven historical process which has moved from dictatorship to democracy, from domination to hegemony.' They use this suggestive term 'racial rule' only a few times to denote a shift in the USA from racial dictatorship to racial democracy, but do not provide a substantial discussion of this possibly innovative concept.

They argue that the USA has experienced a dramatic 'transition from a racial dictatorship to a racial democracy' (1994, p. 66) and significantly question their argument that today 'without question, there has been significant progress toward racial democracy' ([67], p. 157). Empirical studies certainly do indicate that the overt face and surface level of US racial realities has changed significantly at key historical points. Much public and scholarly consensus concludes that US society looks dramatically different from the days of slavery and Jim Crow. Another strong belief is that very substantial and dramatic racial progress has been made on a number of economic, political and social levels and that inequities in individual opportunity among racial groups are continually diminishing. Along with the outer-appearance transformations occurring in the social-material world, major changes in white conceptualizations of racial matters are believed to have occurred (Bonilla-Silva [7], 2007).

From a systemic racism perspective the term 'racial democracy' is oxymoronic, for a society still pervaded by racial oppression in major societal structures cannot be accurately termed 'democratic'. Formation theory accepts a too-optimistic view of racial democracy, and perhaps for that reason neglects numerous major contemporary effects of the historical foundations of contemporary racial relations and the institutional and systemic racial oppression still experienced by subordinated groups. Mostly avoiding the CRT's 'call to context', they skip analysing in detail the development of the US socio-economic and political system, one whose primary legal document, the US Constitution, and long history of court rulings and government policies have routinely generated and maintained systemic racism in the past and present. Analysis of 'structural racism', 'institutional racism' and 'systemic racism', including much of the historical development and present manifestations, does not appear in *Racial Formation* (see Hamilton [51]). Reaching back in detail to the country's founding moments, systemic racism theory offers a much more extensive historical time frame and discussion for understanding well-institutionalized realities and continuities of US racism (Feagin [37]; Bell 2007).

Systemic racism theory investigates questions concerning large-scale and long-term impacts of white elites' decision to legalize and justify enslavement of Africans and theft and abuse of indigenous Americans' lands,

and examines the strong inertial force (the social reproduction process) that sustains a white-generated system of racial oppression and white wealth (Feagin [37], [39]). The everyday operation of racial oppression and the associated wealth monopoly, and its generally stable equilibrium, are only occasionally disrupted in significant ways (often temporarily), and then when there is 'interest convergence' between the goals of protesting Americans of colour and some segment of the white elite (Bell [4], [6]). In periods of US history when significant racial changes take place, the sociopolitical interests of the white elite have generally been more important than commitments to racial justice (Lauren [60]; Anderson [3]; Feagin and O'Brien 2003). Such data support Bell's ([4]) interest convergence hypothesis, that Americans of colour only make progress against oppression when some whites significantly gain. The US political-legal system does not permit a 'remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites' (Bell [4], p. 523).

The racist system does change, especially at a surface level, to meet external shifts and resistance pressures, but so far shifts have occurred without altering most of its racist foundation and essential racial structures (Wilson [90]; Feagin [37], [39]). In addition, whites' recurring backtracking on earlier concessions to the social movement aims of people of colour is commonplace. Omi and Winant, among others, overlook the serious reversals of racial justice and persistence of huge racial inequalities that have followed the 1960s civil rights movement and do not seriously address the actual effects of the 'civil rights' legislative and legal changes in society (Klinkner and Smith [57]). They fail to deal with the reality that in numerous geographical areas and societal arenas such changes, like ending official Jim Crow, only modestly or very partially altered massive underlying inequalities and everyday patterns of oppression.

Today, Jim-Crow-like patterns of discrimination persist – such as extensive racial profiling and large-scale imprisoning of African Americans and Latinos – and major civil rights laws remain substantially unenforced (Alexander [1]; Feagin [39]). In recent decades, 1960s civil rights laws have been watered down by Supreme Court decisions and congressional actions reflecting whites' backlash against token or modest changes in major institutions. Many southern areas officially liberated from Jim Crow continue to operate significant informal segregation, in which some white-conforming blacks do better, but the majority endure lives more similar to than different from the lives of their parents under legal segregation – at least in numerous local political, socio-economic and status terms (Alexander [1]; Feagin [39]).

Important partial or surface-level changes are widely cited and often become a distraction from more ingrained structural oppressions and deepening inequalities that continue to define US society (Elias [32], p. 498). The character of many racial changes suggests the concept of 'surface flexibility', flexibility on racial matters that white elites utilize in framing racial realities. While some ideas, practices and surface appearances certainly change over time, the major material and foundational realities of systemic racial inequalities have remained substantially intact. The structures and forces of US systemic racism may sometimes be less obvious than in the past, at least for most whites, and today's oppression often appears to be more subtly and covertly maintained (Feagin and Feagin [41]; Bonilla-Silva [7]). Nonetheless, major racial divisions and inegalitarian hierarchical structures that have existed from the country's beginning largely persist, power imbalances between whites and most people of colour have changed but modestly, and a great many contemporary racially framed stereotypes, images, emotions and narratives about racial groups are reminiscent of earlier times. Certainly, US society has periodically changed, but not nearly as much as the 'great transformation' theorization of Omi and Winant ([67]) generally suggests. To see this, one need only examine today's great expansion of 'hate groups' working on the Internet, increase in racialized political campaigns, racially organized and heavily populated prison-industrial complex, racially segregated residential city areas and schools, and mostly white

(male) political and economic power brokers who continue to uphold and justify racial group disparities and discord (Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Alexander [1]).

Systemic racism theory argues that white racial oppression and its hierarchical ordering are still very much alive and foundational in the USA. They remain beneficial to whites as a group and remain deeply rooted in US institutions that continue to sustain and enrich numerous white actors. Slavery and subsequent Jim Crow segregation provided a great many white families and their ancestors outside the white power elite with many unjustly derived social, economic and political advantages ('racial capital'). A number of white Americans who did not profit directly from the slavery system are relatively affluent today because of large-scale federal giveaways to their ancestors – such as the 246 million acres of land given away almost exclusively to white families under US homestead laws from the 1860s to the 1930s and/or the massive federal government veterans' and housing programmes after the Second World War (Katznelson [56]; Feagin [39]). Such extensive unjust enrichment for whites has long meant unjust impoverishment for African Americans and other Americans of colour. Over centuries, the social actions of exploitation and disenfranchisement have created much income, wealth, power and other forms of racial capital for whites, a socio-economic imbalance among races, which have in turn provided abundant racial capital for later generations of whites to the present (Feagin [37], [39]). Unjust impoverishment and varieties of racial oppression were then, as now, the lot for the majority of African Americans and many other Americans of colour.

Importance of the black 'radical' tradition and black counter-framing

One of the heavily criticized theoretical frameworks in Omi and Winant's ([67]) formation theory analysis is critical black social thought, labelled by them as nationalistic and 'radical' (in the sense of 'extreme') black thought. Yet, Omi and Winant offer inadequate analysis of this strong intellectual tradition and fail to see its importance as liberating counter-system social thought and action within a systemic racism context. This dismissal of much critical black thought as radical is a major disservice to a long tradition of critical black social thinkers and movement actors, like W. E. B. Du Bois, who often supported black liberation in conjunction with universal human rights (Elias [34]). According to Omi and Winant ([67], p. 139), 'the 'triumph' of liberal democracy failed to placate [black] radicals who sought not only rights, but power and resources as well.' The tone of this, in the context of formation theory's strong critique of major black thinkers and activists, seems to suggest that it is radical to strive for essential material resources, to be power-and-resources aware and to seek true racial equality through aggressive contestation.

Omi and Winant also make it seem as if effective black social movements and critical thought began in the 1950s and 1960s, thereby overlooking the much older counter-system tradition of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black social thinkers and movements. For example, the black counter-framing societal analyses and social justice actions of early nineteenth- century black theorists and actors – like Benjamin Banneker, David Walker, Alexander Crummell, Martin Delany, Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, among others – challenged whites' racial oppression in numerous societal arenas, including those outside the state (Elias [31]). Any discussion of racial democracy, racial formations and racial projects ought to revisit the ideas of early black counter-system theorists and explore the work of more recent critical black social theorists. We recognize that critical black thinkers frequently provide insightful social knowledge concerning the meanings and realities of US racial oppression, valid critiques of whites' racist social system, and rational and legitimate demands for social justice, human rights, desegregated (real) democracy and a just share of socio-economic resources (Du Bois [25], [28]).

Through courageous anti-racist counter-framing ideas and actions, African Americans have long waged war against the realities of racial oppression and associated socio-economic exploitation. In the process, they have

often developed strategic practices and ways of thinking benefiting other oppressed, exploited and disenfranchised people of colour in the USA and other societies. The ongoing dialectical relationship between extensive white oppression and resistance of blacks and other racial groups, including assertive counter-framing against systemic racism, provides a much more realistic picture of actual US racial conflicts than that suggested in formation theory's democratic-pluralist view.

Formation theory, like mainstream racial relations theory, also neglects or discounts insights of critical black social scientists and legal scholars who have systematically assessed white power structures and behaviours and provided alternative counter-system viewpoints on US society. Yet, it is exactly the ideas of many black social scientists that have advanced social scientific knowledge away from a narrow white-constructed world view. These black social scientists' soundly researched analyses of structural, institutional and systemic racism set in place by white actors and development of sociological concepts to express this social reality have, despite great adversity, enhanced intellectual development and diversity throughout the social science disciplines. Thus, W. E. B. Du Bois's numerous sociological works, as well as books such as Joyce Ladner's ([59]) *The Death of White Sociology* and Robert Washington and Donald Cunnigen's ([85]) *Confronting the American Dilemma of Race: The Second Generation Black American Sociologists*, are among the black sociological works that radically reposition the discourse on US racism and present sociological analyses often contradicting racial formation theory. In Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's ([98]) *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology*, numerous social scientists of colour raise serious questions about the racialized nature of social science methods and knowledge, and challenge major aspects of formation theory.

A major difference between systemic racism theory and racial formation theory concerns the question of the legitimacy, sociohistorical significance and epistemological importance of 'radical' black perspectives. Whereas formation theory is critical of this tradition, systemic racism theory emerges from and in numerous ways builds on the critical black intellectual tradition. Like that tradition, systemic racism theory foregrounds and analyzes whites' role as racial oppressors and architects of systemic racism, past and present. This approach often identifies whites' social pathologies and powerful forms of oppression, critical knowledge necessary for correcting misperceptions about the roots of power and privilege and group conflicts. Systemic racism theory also builds on the critical black intellectual tradition in highlighting the strong tradition of resistance, anti-racist counter-framing, and oppositional movements by black Americans and other Americans of colour. Much white domination has been strongly opposed, and this domination has been substantially non-consensual in the present as in the past, as centuries of aggressive African, Native, Latin and Asian American struggles against that domination demonstrate. Formation theory (Omi and Winant [67], pp. 66–7) thus involves an incomplete application of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony. While a certain qualified consent of the oppressed to dominant racial ideologies and framing certainly does occur in the past and present, the reasons for consent must be more fully examined. Consent is routinely obtained by whites through obviously coercive threats and pressures – for example, threats of beatings, death, imprisonment and loss of income, as well as more subtle and covert threats against the lives and livelihoods of people of colour (Alexander [1]).

Conclusion: evading white racism?

Major aspects of systemic racism theory and racial formation theory address crucial issues about the societal realities of 'race' and racism, the ways that racial group relations are structured, and the sociohistorical significance of racial oppression and inequality. From a systemic racism perspective, Omi and Winant's ([67]) theory of a dramatic societal transformation with regard to US racial matters is substantially exaggerated. Oppression and inequality remain central and foundational, even though they are often better disguised in the 'colorblind', 'post-race' language of a contemporary white frame. White Americans continue to rule the US social, political, economic, educational and cultural landscapes, albeit often with assistance from a modest few

of the formerly excluded. Along with great access to societal power and resources, whites today do not face the oppressive racialized barriers that most people of colour still face, including stigmatization, marginalization and exclusion. Characterized by 'segregated integration', the USA is far from achieving 'racial democracy' with those subordinated consenting freely to this system, and the reality of systemic racism in the USA continues to be one of oppression and contestation across a strong colour line, not a general mutual consent and greatly increasing desegregation and real democracy. To claim that subordinated groups have truly consented to a racialized rule or have voluntarily 'assimilated' to their position in the white-imposed racial hierarchy is theoretically and empirically misguided, neglecting a long history of past and present African, Native, Latin and Asian American struggles with white oppressors. From a systemic racism perspective, group coercion and compliance, even group survival, is more accurate than group consent.

Formation theory's concepts of racial projects and racial formation become much more accurate in empirical terms, and perhaps more useful for a theory of racial oppression, if one recognizes that these projects and formations are part of a much bigger societal 'box', the larger social context of an oppressive system that surrounds and shapes them. In the US case, diverse racial projects and shifting formations can better be interpreted as involving contestations and shifts that take place after the imposition of, and mainly within the context of, a massive US system of white-generated racial oppression that has been foundational for several centuries. Racial formation theory and other sociological theories of race and racism that ignore or downplay this sociohistorical reality continue to provide at best a partial or evasive perspective on the actual racial structure and operation of US society.

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Notes

Footnotes

1 1. We put 'race' and 'whites' in quote marks here to indicate that systemic racism theory problematizes these widely used terms.

2 2. We are currently preparing a book that will extend systemic racism theory.

3 3. More complex meanings of 'whites' and people of colour emerge in our larger theoretical work that problematizes such terms and considers multiraciality and the struggles between self-chosen identity and socially imposed racial identity.

4 4. Gottfredson (1994) drafted 'Mainstream science on intelligence', a statement in the *Wall Street Journal* endorsed by 51 white academics who insist from 'IQ tests' that US blacks do not have the same average intellectual capacity as US whites.

5 5. An intersectionalist analysis is necessary for understanding the diverse experiences and power of different racial groups, including the effects of gender, class and other oppression/inequality within and among different groups of colour. See, for example, Yanick St Jean and Joe Feagin's ([76]) *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism* and Patricia Hill Collins' ([16]) *Black Feminist Thought*.

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