
RACE IN AMERICA: THE DILEMMA CONTINUES

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.¹

TWENTY years ago the United States was a country in flames. Fires flickered from Paterson, New Jersey, to Detroit, Michigan, to Harlem in New York City. Racial conflict was at the heart of this national conflagration; over 50 cities burned. The powder keg that touched off a year of “Burn, Baby, Burn” was a police incident in a black community—Watts, Los Angeles—on a hot, muggy night, August 11, 1965. However, the fuse leading to the eventual explosion had been lit and burning for generations.

The 1960s provided a frightening glimpse of a dismal American future. That future was characterized by war between the races; an aroused, largely urban black population was in armed conflict with the largely white forces of social control—the police, the National Guard, and the Army. The potential scenario seemed certain to parallel the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, between Hindus and Muslims in India, and between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. The United States seemed destined for the kind of black–white conflict characteristic of South Africa—a level of conflict capable of destroying our society. Yet somehow the United States managed to avoid the ravages of such internecine struggle; the flames were doused, or so it seemed.

¹Dubois (1961), p. 23.

In the summer of 1980, fifteen years after Watts, Liberty City in Miami, Florida, exploded. Once again, the specter of irreconcilable differences confronted the country. Television news commentaries, newspaper editorials, articles in scholarly journals, and everyday conversation over coffee or beer all asked the same questions: How could this happen in the United States? Hadn't a successful "war on poverty" been waged? Wasn't the United States a model for the rest of the world in its founding ethic of equality among men? Didn't the United States provide avenues for upward mobility to all its citizens without prejudice? The reality of an aggrieved, militant minority—urban blacks—presented a palpable contradiction to the ideal of an egalitarian society.

This book is about race and the difference race makes in the lives of Americans. Our question is a straightforward one: Is the United States indeed a "nation divided by color"?—as the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded after an exhaustive study of the conditions and circumstances leading up to the urban warfare of the 1960s.² We wish to establish the extent to which racial identity influences opportunities and outcomes for Americans. Looking at census data from 1980 and earlier, we compare the relative statuses of blacks and whites in this country. Do blacks and whites have comparable educational attainment? Have blacks achieved economic parity with whites? Is the racial difference in mortality decreasing or increasing? To what extent do the two races live in the same neighborhoods? Has the legacy of black deprivation growing out of legal slavery and perpetuated by continuing racial discrimination in the society been overcome?

Race and Economic Status in America

Racial and ethnic competition has been a hallmark of American society from the moment the first European settlers arrived to discover an established Native American presence. Periodically, this competition has spilled over into violent conflict. Whether the struggle occurred in political patronage systems, in labor-organizing halls, in university classrooms, or in the street, there has been a long history of struggle between racial and ethnic groups. The Irish, West Indians, Germans, Chinese, Cubans, Italians, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Afro-Americans have all struggled among themselves and with each other over how societal wealth and privileges were to be distributed. So ax-

²National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968).

iomatic was strife along racial lines that the noted scholar W. E. B. DuBois was prompted to conclude that "the color line is the problem of the twentieth century."³

Despite the long tradition of ethnic and racial conflict in our society, we are without general models which effectively summarize race relations.⁴ The absence of such a general model of race relations should not be construed, however, as a failure to study the problem, for race and race relations has been one of the most exhaustively analyzed problems in American scholarship. Rather, the complexity of the subject has impeded the development of generally applicable models. Majority and minority group relations, specifically relations between blacks and whites, represent the complex intertwining of historical, economic, political, social, and cultural factors. Thus, any serious study of these relationships must attend to the broad range of factors that affect relations between blacks and whites.

This book began as a descriptive study of whites and blacks; its task was to compare the relative statuses of the two groups. Over time, the book evolved into a more broadly defined examination of the nexus between economic status and racial identity in American society. Time and time again, as we compared the status of whites and blacks in education, fertility, employment, earnings, and family structure, the power of economic factors was observed. Economic status was found to make an important difference, at points exceeding racial identity as the primary explanatory factor.

Economic status is critical in the lives of Americans generally and in the lives of black Americans in particular. This should come as no surprise given the nature of our society. In the United States the quality of a person's life is often closely related to available economic resources. Modifying the aphorism that "you are what you eat," we can conclude in this instance that "you are what you can afford." Our society is founded upon a market economy; as such, the "good life" is a commodity to be bought and sold. The basic essentials, such as food, clothing, and shelter, and the elaborate enhancements, such as sporty cars, ocean cruises, and private school educations, are both allocated in relation to purchasing power. Even physical health and well-being is influenced by a person's economic standing.

Against this backdrop of the importance of economics in the lives of Americans, it is useful to consider briefly the economic histories of most Americans. Long viewed as the land of opportunity, the United States has been a place for dreamers who aspire to great heights. The dream has generally been put in the form of an Horatio Alger "rags to

³DuBois (1944), p. 23.

⁴Frazier (1966) chap. 4, Blalock (1967).

riches" saga where a person made a fortune or achieved success by the sweat of his brow. It matters little that more people failed (or succeeded modestly) than duplicated Alger's remarkable feats. The point was the dream itself and the possibilities held out for the future.

If the dream of success has not always availed itself to individuals, it has been real for different racial and ethnic groups in the United States.⁵ Thus, people fleeing persecution, famine, or grinding poverty in their home countries have managed to find a bright alternative in the United States. They have risen to successful positions in the health fields, industry, education, politics, and commerce. In fact, most immigrant groups in this country have claimed great forward progress after several generations.⁶

Common perceptions to the contrary, black Americans have also made tremendous strides in this country. The fact that their current position is one of considerable disadvantage relative to whites is sometimes viewed as reason for dismissing the progress that black Americans have made. In the span of three generations, beginning with Emancipation, black Americans have profoundly altered their social, economic, political, and psychological characteristics. Despite the experiences of chattel slavery, sharecropping in the feudal South and *lumpen* labor in factories of the industrializing North, black Americans managed to progress economically. The counterpoints to this remarkably accelerated development of the black population are provided by the disproportionate numbers of blacks who continue to be mired in poverty and by the examples of immigrant groups who arrived in this country generations after blacks had arrived, only to catch up with and pass black Americans on the ladder to success. This book hopes to shed some light on this apparent contradiction.

Data and Methods of Study

The data for this study are from the 1980 Census of Population and more recent Census Bureau publications. The purpose of the decennial census is to gather information about the population's characteristics and housing patterns for use by governmental units in their planning and operation. Census data are also routinely used by researchers to study questions of scholarly interest.

This study of black and white differences relies primarily on census data. In many instances, however, the 1980 census data are supplemented with information from earlier censuses or from other sources,

⁵Sowell (1981).

⁶Lieberson (1980).

such as national surveys, local studies, and other census surveys. This study's reliance on census data is both an asset and a liability. A major strength of census data is its scale and representativeness, since these data provide information on many thousands of Americans. A major liability of census data is the general nature of the information which they provide. Since census data are collected primarily for governmental purposes, these data are usually in the form of general population statistics. Moreover, the sheer size of the population on which census statistics are collected limits both the number and detail of questions that can be asked.

Census data provide information about income, family organization and size, labor force participation, and educational attainment. Using demographic techniques to view this information from a variety of perspectives, we are able to illustrate the comparative status of blacks and whites in 1980.

Many of the census data are from the 1980 Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) computer tapes, prepared for public release by the Bureau of the Census and containing records for a sample of households. For each housing unit sample, information on the characteristics of that unit and its occupants is provided.⁷

The sample used in analyses for this book is drawn from a file containing 250 variables for 12 million people. Whites, Hispanics, and others were sampled from the A file at the rate of 1 in 1,000; blacks were sampled at the rate of 1 in 100. The rationale for oversampling blacks was to provide a sample of sufficient size for comparative analyses with the proportionately larger white sample. Our sample consisted of 70 economic or social variables on approximately 450,000 people.

Overview of the Volume

Each chapter in this book examines the comparative status of black and white Americans. We look at the internal diversity of blacks and whites; we also look at the groups in relation to one another and over time. Chapters 2–5 examine the dynamic population processes of fertility, mortality, growth, and migration. Over time, these processes have changed not only the size but also the age structure and geographic location of the black and white populations in the United States.

Chapter 6 describes marital status and family structure; Chapter 7 describes educational attainment and school enrollment; Chapters 8–11

⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census (1983), *Census of Population and Housing, 1980, Public Use Microdata Samples: Technical Documentation*.

focus on the economic statuses of blacks and whites as revealed in the 1980 census. Of special importance in this connection is the relationship of economic status to other characteristics of the individual. In Chapter 12, we compare foreign-born and native-born blacks.

While this book relies heavily on the "race-differences paradigm" that has characterized so much of the research on blacks and whites in our society, we continue to be mindful of the characteristics shared by the two races. Indeed, we are struck by the fact that race itself is in so many ways more an attributed quality than a real one. As many scholars have noted, race in a heterogenous society like the United States is often no more than a socially constructed and defined characteristic. It is not at all uncommon in the United States, for example, to find considerable overlap between blacks and whites in terms of their values, personal histories, and blood lines. The idea of race is a much purer concept than the reality of race in American society. How else is one to understand the possibility of blacks "passing" as whites or of white jazz pianists qualifying for the title of "blue-eyed soul brother"?

In this book we consciously examine the impact of race on the lives of black and white Americans and find that the sociological reality of race is more important than its biological reality. Race exerts profound influence over the lives of people in this society. W. I. Thomas reminded us that what men perceive to be real becomes real in its consequences.⁸ This powerful assessment still rings true in American racial issues.

⁸Cited in Janowitz (1966) p. xl.