

== Prologue ==

GROWING up in a white, working-class family in the 1950s Midwest, I gave very little thought to and was rarely confronted with issues of racial inequality. Instead, I was interested in issues of class inequality and the future effects of economic changes on blue-collar workers. I have vague memories from high school of knowing that race was important, but probably like many others then and now, I thought that it did not have much to do with me. I watched with fear and concern as the civil rights movement unfolded on TV, and I noticed a strange sense of discomfort regarding the one or two African American kids who attended my large high school. Although I barely knew their names and never interacted with them, I was aware of a sense that somehow they were different when they walked down the hall, but I did not give it much thought. My concerns were about jobs, the economy, and, for myself, how to get a college education.

My parents, neither of whom had graduated from high school, were lucky members of the working class because they both had steelworker jobs and together they could make a decent living. In the 1950s, however, steelworkers were subject to periodic strikes, and I remember my parents' noticeable apprehension during those times and the focused look on my mother's face as she counted the dimes in the booklets she had been collecting for a rainy day when she would need them to make ends meet. I also remember knowing how different my life was from the lives of my relatives who did not make it into jobs in the steel factory. Some lived in abject poverty, sometimes in rural areas without running water, and almost always without steady jobs. It was quite clear to me even as a child that my life was different from the lives of my poorer relatives primarily because my parents belonged to a very strong union that made the company they worked for pay them decent wages. Interestingly, my parents did not necessarily see it that way. They had very little good to say about the union and a surprising degree of loyalty and gratitude to the company. They seemed to believe that the company was magnanimous and the union was corrupt, but they did follow closely

and intently when negotiations were under way, and they knew to the penny what their jobs paid.

When I graduated from high school, my parents were proud that I was able to get a job as a secretary in the same steel company where they worked. They took it as a personal commendation of their good work records. Their highest aspirations for my brother and for other males in the family were for them to obtain jobs at this company, and my brother did so. He, however, went one step further and entered an apprenticeship in a skilled trade; my parents held only semiskilled jobs. At one time my mother, my father, my uncle, my brother, several cousins, and my brother-in-law all worked at the same company. After two years in my secretarial job at the company, during which time I attended college part-time in the evenings, I left to attend college full-time. My parents thought this was a foolish decision on my part. They insisted that I get documentation from the company indicating that I could return to my secretarial job at some point in the future if I wished to do so, since this company, like others that were the subject of bidding wages up during World War II, had developed a policy that once you left the company, you could never come back. Because there were few working-class jobs that paid such good wages and offered such good benefits, this policy was a significant threat to anyone who took the company for granted.

It was only after I left home to go to college full-time that I was confronted with civil rights as a social movement. I gradually learned more about racial inequality from my college classes. Then, of course, I got on board with others and became a strong proponent of civil rights and of redistributive policies to help the poor. As I took these ideas home, however, I confronted the resistance of my family, especially of my parents' generation, to such "highfalutin" ideas. In response, I heard of their dissatisfaction with "their" company hiring blacks into jobs like theirs, and I inevitably heard about how these blacks did not deserve such jobs or that they did not work hard enough. Race was not a usual topic of conversation in my family, but when raised as an issue, it was reacted to with dismay.

Such a response was doubly surprising, because when we moved to the "dream home" my parents were having built in 1964 (my last year in high school), it turned out that both the family next door and the one across the street were black. My parents were not pleased, but neither did they make an issue of it. Further, both my brother and my younger sister became best friends with the black kids who lived next door to us. My parents did not object, nor really have anything much to say about it, and they never objected when the kids were at or in our house. For years after, the family next door was welcomed at our family parties, and my relatives were very appreciative that, even though both we and they had

moved away, members of this family attended the funerals of both of my parents.

Once I finished my undergraduate degree and went to graduate school, I moved into the world of the professional and managerial class, a world I found as alien to me as the issue of race had been in my family. I incurred many "identity crises," as I went between college and home and felt that I did not belong in either place. One of the most troubling issues in my graduate school experience was hearing my social science colleagues, on the one hand, making disparaging remarks about the racism of the white working class and, on the other, holding up the working class as the source of hope for progressive change. I felt that both issues were seriously misunderstood. Regarding the racism of the working class, I wished only that these students could understand the precariousness of unionized white workers' hold on stable lifestyles and the serious consequences for them of losing out on jobs like those at the steel company where my parents worked. Regarding the idea of the working class as progressives waiting in the wings for a social movement to mobilize them, I simply thought of my colleagues as exceedingly naive and disconnected from the working class that I knew, which was basically apolitical and mostly concerned with trying to move into and adopt a middle-class lifestyle. In more recent years, the working class members of my family, especially those in the generation after me, have been trying to maintain and hold on to middle-class status despite the disappearance of factory jobs like the ones my parents had held.

During graduate school, I was even more certain that my social science colleagues would not understand the extent to which I thought of their liberalism as a product of the good fortune of their class positions. From my view, they could afford to be generous because they did not directly compete with blacks for either housing or jobs. Although I had become deeply committed to the progressive policies of civil rights, equality, and justice, I did not see the working class that I knew as leading this movement. Indeed, most of the working-class people I knew rarely thought about, talked about, or involved themselves in politics, at least not beyond the local level. Doing so would have been very difficult at any rate. Most were working odd hours in factories that ran around the clock. Some were working more than one job, and many used the skills they had developed in the factory in an endless array of maintenance and home improvement jobs for themselves, their friends, or other family members, and some tried to use these skills to make additional money on the side. For everyone, time was precious and often in short supply. Although there were a lot of family get-togethers, there were few occasions that I can remember when my parents or family members involved themselves in community or civic affairs. In my environment, the only outside activities that were prevalent were the inevitable participa-

tion in church or sports and attendance at an occasional union meeting during contract talks when a strike was threatened. Family and work were the primary foci of the life I experienced in the working class.

In contrast to my family, however, I had been very involved in church and various evangelical religious groups, and this was the second reason I felt separated from my social science colleagues in graduate school. Church and faith had been essential parts of my core identity, and I continued to participate in church and religious groups into graduate school and beyond. My sense of justice and fairness was grounded in my religious beliefs, but few of those I knew to be involved in the social movements of the 1960s were churchgoers. While I strove to find a connection between my faith and my politics, I became increasingly uncomfortable in the kinds of churches where I had grown up, especially as these churches became increasingly politicized, but in a conservative, right-wing direction. As I became politically more liberal, two essential components of my background—religious evangelicals and the white working class—became increasingly conservative. Over time I found myself even more distanced from the life I had known, but I regularly returned home to visit my family, who always had been and remained very close—this was not a part of myself that I could leave behind. Hence, trying to understand these distinctions and how to bridge them became important intellectual and political goals.

In my professional life, I did research on inequality in several studies, including the influence of the working class in government (“theories of the state”); the role of unions in the public sector; and race, ethnic, and gender inequality in the Chicago labor force. As I moved from a sociology department to a business school in 1983, I took my interest in politics and inequality with me and fortuitously intersected with the growing interest among corporations in diversity in the labor force. This seemed like a perfect fit for my interests and new academic location. I began to do research and to teach courses on diversity in the labor force to master of business administration (MBA) students, and later to undergraduates, and I had the opportunity to be involved in groups that were trying to develop the field of diversity both in business school education and in corporate training.

For someone with a background in sociology, I found myself dissatisfied with the content of the training provided by diversity experts, both in the university and in corporations. Both groups tended to organize their discussion of diversity around the need to eliminate stereotypes and prejudice—that is, to combat racism. I found this approach to be wrongheaded. I thought the problem had more to do with the structures of inequality (such as access to jobs that pay a living wage) than with the personal prejudices of people in the workforce. In contrast to the typical approach used in business schools, I organized my courses on diversity

around social science research on inequality in jobs, income, and education, rather than around prejudice and racism (or sexism). I found, however, that I had no more success (and possibly less) than those who talked about prejudice and stereotypes. In general I found, as others did, that corporate interest in and talk about race and diversity either puzzled whites who were forced to attend diversity training programs or, alternatively, assured them because they did not believe themselves to be prejudiced or to be someone who engaged in the use of stereotypes. But I also found that diversity training frequently made them mad and, not infrequently, resistant to the overall message regarding the value and benefits of diversity.

Such reactions emerged in a context that was puzzling to me but, on reflection, not unlike the images I had of my family growing up. I found that for my mostly white students (or corporate participants), race was not an especially salient issue. It was not something they thought about very often. If they did, they assumed it was about other people and not about them. And perhaps most importantly, I found that most students believed themselves to be part of the solution to racial inequality, not part of the problem. Most of the students in my classes fit a typical profile: everyone was nice, no one discriminated, everyone believed in equal opportunity and supported civil rights, but most everyone got irritated, if not mad, when the issue of affirmative action was raised. Hence, I asked myself a fundamental question, namely: *if there are no racists and no racism, then why is there still a problem with racial inequality?* It was through these observations and reflections on my own history that I came to conceptualize and develop this study. I specifically wanted to know how people like my students and my parents learned about and came to make sense of racial inequality; how they thought about their own life experiences with regard to it; and importantly, how they tapped into and used social resources that reproduced and reinforced the advantages they enjoyed as whites. Knowing how important access to jobs that paid a living wage was to my family, I knew that jobs would be a key theme in my interviews. And as I gained a broader perspective on the issues of racial inequality, I wanted specifically to understand why racial inequality was not more salient among white Americans, and specifically why it did not seem to create the kind of moral dilemma that Myrdal believed would lead to dramatic social change. Thus, I also wanted to understand how whites thought about racial inequality and their political engagement and commitments with regard to the politics of inequality.

To answer these important questions, I wanted to draw on research from sociology, political science, psychology, and history, because clearly dynamics from all of these fields come together in the lives of real people who develop ideas about how the world works, make decisions about what they want out of their lives, make choices from the array of social

resources available to them, and out of their life experiences undertake political or social commitments that support or oppose change to existing social relations.

Some may object to my focusing on whites in this study, but in doing so, my framing is consistent with what Gunnar Myrdal said about his own study, namely:

Although the Negro problem is a moral issue both to Negroes and to whites in America, we shall in this book have to give primary attention to what goes on in the minds of white Americans.... It became increasingly evident that little, if anything, could be scientifically explained in terms of the Negroes themselves....

All our attempts to reach scientific explanations of why the Negroes are what they are and why they live as they do have regularly led to determinants on the white side of the race line. (Myrdal 1944, lxxxiii)

Despite this keen insight, in *The American Dilemma* Myrdal focused instead on the lives and conditions of “Negroes” and not on what was happening with white Americans, as he said was required. With the assistance of a large staff of scholars, Myrdal’s massive work outlined every aspect of life in the United States among American blacks, while giving very little attention to the “white side of the race line.” In contrast, I do focus in this book on (non-Hispanic) whites, not only on their attitudes toward blacks (and other minorities) but also on their embeddedness within the social structure and the ways in which they use their social positions to access advantages for themselves and their families and friends. That is, I endeavor to explain how whites use social structure to gain and maintain racial advantage and how they construct meaning both about racial inequality and about themselves as whites in a world where whites, on average, are advantaged.

Some may also object to the primary focus in this book on the white-black divide. That is partly purposeful and partly pragmatic. Given the contrast I wanted to raise with Myrdal’s book, it makes sense to concentrate primarily on white views of blacks rather than on minorities in general. Further, as was the case when Myrdal was writing, there is a special relevance to the relationship of whites to blacks, given the history of slavery and the civil rights movement.

According to Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders (1996), no other issue divides Americans more. I do address issues with regard to Latinos and Asians in my discussions about immigration, but in the responses to various questions in the interview, it was clear that whites have a much more formed view of blacks than they do of Latinos or Asians. In addition to the substantive reasons for interviewing only non-Hispanic whites in this study, there are also practical reasons. Because I collected

data through semistructured interviews and wanted a good representation in each region, each additional dimension to the interview base would have doubled the number of interviews needed. It was not possible to add that many more interviews to this study.

To get at the broad issues I want to address in this study, I undertook in-depth interviews that traced the life histories of the interviewees and asked specifically about education and jobs. In addition, I asked the interviewees how they thought about their lives and what factors led them to their current life outcomes. I also asked about their views on public policy issues and about their general outlook on issues regarding inequality. Given my background as someone who came from a white working-class family, who got involved in evangelical churches, and who then became upwardly mobile into a professional position and lived in an upper-middle-class suburb, I was familiar with the concerns addressed by the interviewees as I began to hear their life stories. Nearly everyone I talked to had access to some kind of social resources when looking for jobs. They used them readily, and they experienced life outcomes that were directly related to the kind of assistance they could derive from their social networks and their embeddedness in various kinds of communities.

Although the social resources available to some of the interviewees were so sparse that they were not able to provide much help, this was not the typical story, even among the working-class interviewees. Further, although some interviewees failed to avail themselves of the social resources at hand, or sometimes were not competent to use the social resources available to them, most of the interviewees had people within their social environments who could provide assistance, even when it was not sought, and sometimes even when it was actively resisted. Thus, the life outcomes of the white interviewees in my study were substantially improved because of their access to social resources from family, neighborhoods, schools, churches, and other social institutions with which they were engaged. This insight contributed to an important realization: almost all of the social science literature on race is organized around a framework of discrimination—cast, that is, in terms of the negative things that are done to blacks and other minorities—when it appears that much of the “action” in reproducing racial inequality comes in the form of advantages, that is, in the positive things that whites do for each other.

This insight resonates with my own life experiences. For example, in the process of writing this book, I became aware of how much effort, as a white, middle-class mother, I have had to make to keep my children on track (especially given how much time I had to spend away from them). Gaining advantage and having access to favor and to social resources that can provide advantages often take place in the context of natural tenden-

cies for slacking, self-doubt, or immediate gratification, and advantages often accrue even against resistance and following the consequences of poor choices. When these kinds of behaviors are evident among blacks, we call them “oppositional culture,” or even more bizarrely, we talk about the “fear of acting white,” yet based on my observations of upper-middle-class white teenagers, acting white may well include episodes of irresponsibility, inattention, and screwing up. In this context, access to social resources can make up for many injudicious decisions made by white teenagers, often with a great deal of worry and effort on the part of parents who themselves got beyond similar periods in their own youth because of the social resources on which they could draw from family and neighborhoods (Ogbu 1978; Fordham 1996).¹ Growing up in America takes different pathways for white versus black youths (or others) because the greater social resources available to whites make it easier to provide second chances, extra options, and the means to recover from unfortunate decisions. White teenagers are more likely to get the benefit of the doubt and to experience officials in various institutions looking the other way when they transgress, and many can count on rescue when things do not go well. Black teenagers are often unable to count on this kind of protection and direction. I find in this study that such accommodations and special privileges from family, friends, and acquaintances continue into adulthood for whites in the United States—and indeed, throughout their careers.

Although access to social resources and the use of advantage for getting ahead were evident for almost all of the interviewees in this study, not all whites have access to the same kinds of advantages, nor do they all have the same outcomes when attempting to use social resources. Hence, when the interviewees in this study talked about their life experiences and their views of public policies that address issues of inequality and fairness, they did not sound similar. Instead, several distinct groups among the interviewees stood out that seemed to reflect differences in how well they were doing economically, their political views, and their interest in, engagement with, and concern about inequality. Thus, it was evident that to answer the questions I had posed about how whites come to understand racial inequality and about the relative advantages that whites enjoy, I had to understand the relationship of these various groups of interviewees to each other, and I had to place them in the contemporary political landscape of post-civil rights politics. I explain in the introduction how I categorized the different groups that emerged among the interviewees. Because they reflect the shifting political landscape in the United States, delving into their thinking about race and class inequality presents an opportunity for insight regarding current political changes in the country. The views expressed by the interviewees in this study are relevant, despite changes both nationally and inter-

nationally since the original interviews, because political attitudes in the population have remained fairly consistent over several decades across most major political issues (Kohut 2009), even as party identification has shifted and even though the political dynamics among leaders in the two major political parties have become increasingly hostile.

Despite the continued and extensive attention to issues regarding racial inequality in this country, I believe that our existing theoretical frameworks have often obscured rather than enlightened our understanding and that they have contributed to the contradictions represented by racial inequality in the contemporary United States: the primary focus on discrimination as an explanation for racial inequality rather than attention to the favoritism that takes place among whites through opportunity hoarding and the use of social capital; the dueling empirical evidence offered about whether the country is primarily conservative or liberal or neither; and the confused understanding of the role of race, class, and culture in these trends. I believe that the analysis in this study can explain why we have made less progress than all of us had hoped when the civil rights movement finally brought formal protection against discrimination, but not substantive protection against the advantages that accrue to whites.

My interpretation of the political landscape and my understanding of the main themes that need to be addressed to understand racial inequality have had to evolve as history has outrun the original context of my research. I believe, however, that the issues that I am addressing are fundamental in the structure of U.S. politics and culture and thus have not changed, despite the changing political environment of the last several years. We still frame racial inequality through a lens of discrimination rather than advantage. We still misunderstand and are surprised by our own politics. And we still misunderstand, I believe, the role of various groups of whites in post-civil rights politics. Understanding these issues and their continued importance are the main goals for this book.