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CLASS CONFLICT AND
JIM CROW SEGREGATION
IN THE POSTBELLUM SOUTH

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Students of historical race relations have paid considerable attention to the economic basis of racial antagonisms in recent years, particularly the theme that racial problems in historical situations are related to the more general problems of economic-class conflict. And the writings on this theme have been influenced, in no small measure, by purported Marxian explanations of race. Indeed, the political scientist Ira Katznelson (1973: v) maintains that "in spite of the tendency of some Marxists to reduce issues of race to those of class—thus not recognizing that a racial dynamic has categories of events and behavior that must be dealt with on their own terms—Marxist theory remains the richest, most powerful tool for understanding race and racism." Although there is some variation in the way Marxists interpret race relations (Genovese, 1966, 1969; Burawoy, 1974), orthodox Marxian explanations (Cox,...

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1948; Baran and Sweezy, 1966; Reich, 1971; Wolpe, 1970; Nikolinakos, 1973; Sivananda, 1973) continue to be the most widely used and representative.

ECONOMIC CLASS EXPLANATIONS OF RACIAL ANTAGONISMS

Orthodox Marxists generally stress that racial conflict is epiphenomenal, i.e., merely a special manifestation of class conflict. Accordingly, ideologies of racism, racial prejudices, institutionalized discrimination, segregation, and other factors that reinforce or embody racial stratification are simply part of a superstructure determined and shaped by the particular arrangement of the class structure.

Orthodox Marxists further maintain that because the ultimate goal of the capitalist class is to increase surplus value, efforts will be made to suppress workers’ demands for increased wages and to weaken their bargaining power by promoting divisions within their ranks. The divisions are strengthened and institutionalized to the degree that the capitalist class is able to isolate the lower priced black force by not only supporting job, housing, and educational discrimination against blacks, but also encouraging racial prejudices and ideologies of racial subjugation such as racism. At the same time, orthodox Marxists argue, the capitalist class benefits not only because they have created a labor surplus that is not united against them, not only because the appropriation of surplus from the ethnic labor force is greater than the exploitation rate of the white labor force, but also because they can counteract ambitious claims of the white labor force for higher wages, either by threatening to increase the average wage rate of black workers, or by replacing segments of the white labor force with segments of the black labor force in special situations, such as strikes. In short, orthodox Marxists argue that racial antagonism is a function of class conflict, a “mask for privilege,” designed to conceal the efforts of the ruling class to exploit subordinate racial groups and to divide the working class.
An interesting variation of the orthodox Marxist approach to historical race relations has recently appeared in the writings of Edna Bonacich (1972, 1975). The central hypothesis in Bonacich’s economic based theory is that “ethnic antagonism first germinates in a labor market split along ethnic lines” (Bonacich, 1972: 549). A split labor market occurs when the price of labor for the same work differs for at least two groups, or would differ if they performed the same work.

There are three distinct classes in a split labor market—(1) business or employers, (2) higher paid labor, and (3) cheaper labor. Conflict develops between these three classes because of different interests. The main goal of business or employers is to maintain as cheap a labor force as possible in order either to compete effectively with other businesses, or to maximize economic returns. As long as a labor shortage exists, higher paid labor is in a good bargaining position. Accordingly, if business is able to attract cheaper labor to the market place, the interests of higher paid labor are threatened. They may lose some of the privileges they enjoy, they may lose their bargaining power, and they may even lose their jobs. If the labor market is split along ethnic lines, e.g., if higher paid labor is white and lower paid labor is black, class antagonisms are transformed into ethnic or racial antagonisms.

However, if more expensive labor is strong enough, that is, if they possess the power resources to preserve their economic interests, they can prevent being replaced or undercut by cheaper labor. On the one hand, they can exclude lower paid labor from a given territory. “Exclusion movements clearly serve the interests of higher paid labor. Its standards are protected while the capitalist class is deprived of cheaper labor” (Bonacich, 1972: 555). On the other hand, if it is not possible for higher paid labor to rely on exclusion (e.g., cheaper labor may be indigenous to the territory or may have been imported early in business labor relations, when higher paid labor could not prevent the move), then they will institutionalize a system of ethnic stratification which could (1) monopolize skilled positions, thereby ensuring the effectiveness of strike action; (2)
prevent cheaper labor from developing the skills necessary to compete with higher paid labor (e.g., impose barriers to equal access to education); and (3) deny cheaper labor the political resources that would enable them to undercut higher paid labor through, say, governmental regulations. "In other words," states Bonacich, "the solution to the devastating potential of weak, cheap labor is, paradoxically, to weaken them further, until it is no longer in business' immediate interest to use them as replacements" (Bonacich, 1972: 556). Thus, whereas Marxian arguments associate the development and institutionalization of racial stratification with the motivations and activities of the capitalist class, Bonacich's theory traces racial stratification directly to the powerful, higher paid working class.

As I examine the historical stages of race relations in the United States, I find that the patterns of black/white interaction do not consistently and sometimes do not conveniently conform to the propositions outlined in these respective explanations of racial antagonisms. To illustrate and amplify this point, I have chosen to examine one of the most dynamic periods of American race relations, the nineteenth century postslavery period in the South, from roughly 1865 to the turn of the century. During this period, the South progressively moved from a plantation economy to an industrializing economy and in the process, the traditional patterns of race and class relations in the South were fundamentally altered. My analysis will attempt to show that because they fail to specify the structural conditions that provide antagonistic classes with different power resources to influence racial stratification in various situations, the economic class arguments (that relate racial stratification either to the work of the capitalist class or to the victory of higher paid labor) lack sufficient scope to explain the different manifestations of racial subordination in the postbellum South. My basic thesis is that the meaningful application of the economic class arguments in any given historical period depends heavily on knowledge of the constraints imposed by the particular systems of production during that period, constraints that shape the structural relations
between racial and class groups and which thereby produce different patterns of intergroup interaction.¹

THE PLANTER CLASS AND INSTITUTIONALIZED RACIAL INEQUALITY

In an argument quite similar to that advanced by Oliver C. Cox in 1948, the Marxist scholars, Baran and Sweezy (1966: 247), gloss over the mass of historical data with the less than definitive statement that “when Negroes tried to take advantage of their legal freedom to organize along with poor whites in the Populist movement, the planters answered with violence and the Jim Crow system of legalized segregation.”

Only if we focus on the period immediately following the Civil War can we attribute institutionalized racial inequality solely to the planter class. Initial legislation to restrict and control the black population was not generated by white workers, although they were indeed quite concerned about black competition, but by southern planters and their business and political allies.

Immediately following the Civil War, white supremacy, virtually secured by institutionalized slavery throughout the antebellum South, appeared to be in serious jeopardy. Slaves had been liberated and some were armed. Not only were fears expressed about blacks becoming full citizens and receiving equal political and civil rights, but there was even talk of blacks dividing up the plantation estates. “This was not only competition,” states historian C. Vann Woodward (1971: 251), “it looked to many whites like a takeover.” More fundamentally, the ruling economic elite was frightened because the southern economy was on the verge of total collapse without slave labor. For the ruling elite, “black freedom” signified not only a threat to white supremacy, but also meant the loss of a guaranteed cheap and controlled labor supply for the plantations.

In 1865-1866, southern legislatures, which continued to be controlled by business and planter groups, were given freedom by Presidents Lincoln and Johnson to devise ways to resolve the
problems created by an economy no longer based on slave labor. The legislatures promptly passed a series of discriminatory laws known as the Black Codes. Although the provisions of the Codes varied from state to state, one of their primary objectives was to insure an adequate and cheap labor supply for the plantations. Woodward (1971: 252) informs us that the “Black Codes of 1865-1866 were mainly concerned with forced labor and police laws to get the freedman back to the fields under control.” Those blacks without a permanent residence or unemployed were classified as vagrants and could be arrested and/or fined, and if incapable of paying, were bound out to plantations under labor contracts. As a substitute for the social controls of slavery, the Codes also restricted black movement, denied blacks political and legal rights, and in some states, provided for segregation of certain public facilities.

In April 1866, the Republican controlled Congress nullified the Black Codes by passing a Civil Rights Act which conferred citizenship on the ex-slaves and specified that discriminatory acts against them were punishable by fine and/or federal imprisonment. Black political and civil rights were further protected by the Fourteenth Amendment passed by Congress in June 1866. And, after the Republicans, dominated by the Radical wing, had gained a two-thirds majority in both houses in the November election of 1866, Congress passed two supplementary Reconstruction Acts in 1867 that divided the ten southern states into five military districts under northern supervision and granted blacks voting rights (Franklin, 1967; Bergman, 1969).

In large measure, white reaction to Reconstruction and the specter of black control of the South was shaped by social class interests. Racial tension increased significantly among lower class whites who perceived more clearly than ever the impact of large scale black competition for low status jobs. Reconstruction did not destroy the landowning white aristocracy. Both poor whites and blacks were dependent on the planter classes for their livelihood as tenants and sharecroppers at the very time when these positions were diminishing in the face of
gradual industrialization. The evidence is clear that the planter class of the South effectively prevented any economic or political cooperation or class allegiance between poor blacks and poor whites (Frazier, 1957: 135). As long as poor whites directed their hatred and frustration against the black competitor, the planters were relieved of class hostility directed against them. "Indeed, one motive for the Ku Klux Klan movement of these years was a desire by low class whites to remove the Negro as a competitor, especially in the renting of land" (Marshall, 1961: 66). The essential point is that during the first two decades following the Civil War, poor whites lacked the power resources needed to bring about the kind of institutional changes that would have improved their economic lives, i.e., segregationist laws that would have restricted black competition. Concentrated in positions such as tenant farmers and sharecroppers, their economic position was as precarious in the postbellum period as it was during antebellum slavery. Organized labor remained weak in the face of the overwhelming political and economic resources of the master class.

The response of the "people at the top" to the changes in race relations brought about by Reconstruction contrasted sharply with the lower class white reaction. Within a few years after Reconstruction, the ruling economic elite realized that their earlier apprehensions concerning the Negro were unwarranted. Northern Republicans gradually moved from their earlier position of radicalism and protection of black freedom to a posture of promoting eastern capitalistic expansion in the South (Woodward, 1971: 254). There was greater competition between lower class whites and blacks and therefore increased racial hostility; but the economic and political hold of the privileged classes over southern life was essentially unchallenged. The plantation elite, aligned with the growing industrial sector, was no longer fearful of a black threat or takeover. Indeed, blacks remained in a dependent economic relationship with this sector. Because of this, and because blacks were anxious about the manifestation of lower class white reaction to black competition, conservative white rulers virtu-
ally controlled the black vote prior to 1890. In this connection, Woodward states (1951: 254-255):

It was true that blacks continued to vote in large numbers and to hold minor offices and a few seats in Congress, but this could be turned to account by the conservative white rulers who had trouble with white lower-class rebellion. Black votes could be used to overcome white working-class majorities, and upper-class white protection was needed by blacks under threat of white lower-class aggression. Many reciprocal accommodations between upper-class whites and blacks were possible under the paternalistic order.

THE WHITE LABOR REFORM MOVEMENT AND JIM CROW SEGREGATION

Changes in the system of production exerted considerable influence on the developing patterns of class and racial tension in the New South. In the antebellum period, public power was so heavily concentrated among large planters and so clearly derived from property in slaves and land that racial stratification assumed an overwhelmingly paternalistic character—reflected in the relationships between slaveholders and slaves. This relationship persisted through the early years of the postbellum period. However, as the South experienced gradual industrialization in the late nineteenth century, as new economic institutions generated technological development, expanding modes of communications and more elaborate systems of transportation connecting cities and farms, not only was the distribution of power significantly altered in the South, but race relations became increasingly associated with class conflict (Scruggs, 1971: 70-87).

After the Civil War, the planters had to share their power with a rising middle class of merchant-bankers and owners and operators of factories, mines, and railroads (Scruggs, 1971: 73). Nevertheless, they combined to form a disciplined ruling class, conscious of their overlapping economic interests. And they possessed a mutual feeling of apprehension over the gradual increase in political activity among the white working class in the 1880s and 1890s. Just as changes in the system of
production modified the distribution of power among the ruling elite, so too did it place the workers of the South in greater proximity with one another and facilitated their mobilization into collective action groups.

The structural changes in the labor market accompanied sever economic dislocations for many workers of the South. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, lower class whites found themselves in increasing contact and competition with millions of freed blacks at the very time that a labor surplus developed in the face of enormous population growth in the South (Scruggs, 1971; Woodward, 1951; Key, 1949). The problem was especially acute in the lower South. For the first time, blacks and working class whites of the lower South, historically separated in the black belt (lowlands) and the uplands respectively, were forced by economic conditions to confront one another, bump shoulders, and compete on a wide scale for the same jobs. Black youths gradually moved from the lowlands to the new mining and industrial towns of the uplands, finding dirty and low paying work in tobacco factories, mines, and turpentine camps; meanwhile, sons of white farmers, overwhelmed by debts and falling prices, sifted down from the uplands to the lowlands, settling for work in the textile mills or drifting into tenancy. A new breed of southern politician, whose style combined the evangelistic fervor of the southern preacher with the racist rhetoric of the upcountry hillbilly, emerged to articulate the feelings and represent the interests of working class whites. Their pleas for disfranchisement and legal segregation helped to set in motion a movement that produced decades of Jim Crow segregation (Scruggs, 1971: 81). The signs were clear when the Farmers Alliance, a movement consisting of hundreds of thousands of lower class white farmers and tenants, was first exerting its influence in southern state legislatures, because Jim Crow segregation laws sprang up all over the South (Woodward, 1951: 211-212; Scruggs, 1971: 84-85). For example, in 1887 in Florida; 1888 in Mississippi; 1889 in Texas; 1890 in Louisiana; and 1891 in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Georgia, laws requiring separate accommodations in railway
stations and in streetcars were enacted. Perhaps Woodward (1951: 211) comes closest to summarizing the meaning of these developments, when he states:

It is one of the paradoxes of Southern history that political democracy for the white man and racial discrimination for the black man were often products of the same dynamics. As the Negroes invaded the new mining and industrial towns of the uplands in greater numbers, and the hill country whites were driven into more frequent and closer association with them, and as the two were brought into rivalry for subsistence wages in the cotton field, mines and wharves, the lower-class man’s demand for Jim Crow laws became more insistent. . . . The Negro pretty well understood these forces and his grasp of them was one reason for this growing alliance with the most conservative and politically reactionary class of whites against the insurgent white democracy.

Thus, the late nineteenth century, a period of economic dislocation (caused by industrial capitalism, population pressures, declining farm prices, and exploitative sharecropping) generated a labor reform movement and Jim Crow segregation which grew hand in hand.

DISFRANCHISEMENT AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN BLACKS AND THE WHITE BUSINESS ELITE

The real concern of the business elite in the decade or two following Reconstruction was the threat to their political and economic power by the rise of the agrarian and labor reform movements. It is ironic but not surprising that both the business elite and the black minority were fearful of the rise in white lower class power. The unholy alliance between blacks and white ruling classes prior to 1890 actually prevented the racial code from becoming more severe.

As long as the alliance between blacks and the conservative economic elite existed, the latter frequently denounced Jim Crow laws in aristocratic, paternalistic tones as “unnecessary and uncalled for” and “a needless affront to our respectable and
well behaved colored people” (quoted in Woodward, 1971: 257). According to Woodward (1971: 257), “when the first state Jim Crow law for trains was passed in 1887, a conservative paper rather shamefacedly admitted it was done ‘to please the crackers’.”

However, at the very time that Jim Crow legislation was mushrooming throughout the South, some workers of the Populist movement recognized that as long as conservative whites were aligned with blacks, the possibility of a united working class labor movement to overcome economic exploitation would indeed be difficult. A strenuous effort by the Populists sought to create an alliance of the poor whites and poor blacks. Under the leadership of Tom Watson (Woodward, 1938), a substantial Populist appeal to the black man was generated in Georgia (Owens, 1973). Some successes also occurred in Texas and Arkansas (Bergman, 1969: 310). This was enough to alarm the conservative Democrats representing the southern business interests, and they too increased their drive to attract the support of black voters, including the stuffing of ballot boxes with fraudulent votes. After both the Populists and the Democrats sought to manipulate the black vote, they finally realized that since neither was assured of controlling the black vote, “it was much better to have clear-cut constitutional disfranchisement of the Negro and to leave the white group to fight elections out among themselves” (Franklin, 1967: 337).

The conservative Democrats who had originally placed the blame for the rise of legal segregation on lower class whites when they felt secure about the black vote, joined in the movement for disfranchisement as soon as they became apprehensive about the black vote. Accompanying disfranchisement were increased Jim Crow laws of segregation in both public and private institutions and facilities, including the virtual collapse of public education and the systematic exclusion by white laborers of blacks from jobs in the skilled occupational ranks they had held since slavery, e.g., barbering.
and the better agricultural jobs (Young, 1932: 99; Fogel and Engerman, 1974: 258-264).

WHITE ECONOMIC CLASS INTERESTS AND BLACK SUBORDINATION

Restrictive arguments that the Jim Crow system was the work of the capitalist class, or due solely to the victory of higher paid white labor, obscure the dynamics of the complex patterns of racial inequality in the postbellum South. As I have attempted to show, and historical analysis demonstrates: (1) the initial form of racial stratification in the postbellum period, formalized and sanctioned by the Black Codes, was based solely on the efforts of the plantation elite to insure an adequate and cheap labor supply for the plantations, in the aftermath of slave emancipation. Racial inequality therefore reflected the class interests of the aristocracy and entailed the exploitation of labor; (2) the emergence of initial Jim Crow segregation laws directly parallels the rise of lower class whites to political power in the labor reform movement. Racial inequality therefore reflected the class interests of white workers and was designed to eliminate black encroachment in a context of competitive race relations; (3) once the political alliance and paternalistic bond between blacks and the business classes deteriorated in the face of the Populist challenge, the struggle over the black vote resulted in a united white movement to deprive the Negroes of their political rights; and (4) the racial caste system which encompassed all aspects of black life was solidified both by the ruling class’ support of disfranchisement and by the working class’ drive (with tacit approval of the ruling classes) toward racial exclusiveness in occupation, education, and political power.

THE INFLUENCE OF SYSTEMS OF PRODUCTION ON THE INTERGROUP ARENA

If the foregoing summary of the different contexts of racial antagonisms in the postbellum period raises questions about the
application of economic class theories such as those advanced by the orthodox Marxists and Edna Bonacich, they also suggest a more fundamental question, namely, what accounts for the changes in the power resources possessed by antagonistic classes that ultimately determine the direction of racial interaction? I believe that the answer to this question ultimately entails a discussion of the influence of different systems of production on the intergroup arena.

In the southern plantation economy, public power was overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the white aristocracy. This power was not only reflected in the control of economic resources, and in the development of a legal system that expressed the class interests of the aristocracy, but also in the way that the aristocracy was able to impose its viewpoint on the larger society (Genovese, 1974). This is not to suggest that these aspects of public power have not been disproportionately controlled by the economic elite in modern industrialized Western societies; rather it indicates that the hegemony of the southern elite had been much greater in degree, not in kind. The latter's hegemony was embodied in an economy that required little horizontal or vertical mobility. Further, because of the absence of those gradations of labor power associated with complex divisions of labor, white workers in the antebellum and early postbellum South had little opportunity to challenge the control of the aristocracy. Because white labor lacked power resources in the southern plantation economy, their influence on the form and quality of racial stratification was minimal throughout the antebellum and early postbellum periods. Racial stratification therefore reflected the relationships established between blacks and the white aristocracy, relationships which were not characterized by competition for scarce resources, but by the exploitation of black labor. Social distance tended to be clearly symbolized by rituals of racial etiquette, gestures, and behavior reflecting dominance and subservience. Consequently, any effort to impose a system of public segregation was superfluous. Furthermore, ideologies of racial inferiority (i.e., racism) played less of a role in the subordination of blacks than
they subsequently did in the more competitive system of race relations following the Reconstruction period (Wilson, 1973). Since the social distance gap between the aristocracy and black slaves was large and stable, racism tended to be subtle and indirect. In short, the relationship represented intergroup paternalism because it allowed for “close symbiosis and even intimacy without any threat to status inequalities” (van den Berghe, 1967: 27). This was in sharp contrast to the more competitive forms of race relations that accompanied the development of industrial capitalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, where the complex division of labor and greater mobility not only produced interaction and competition between blacks and the white working class, but also provided the latter with superior resources (relative to those they possessed in the plantation economy) to exert greater influence on the form and the content of racial stratification in the South.

In short, white working class efforts to eliminate black competition generated an elaborate system of Jim Crow segregation that was reinforced by an ideology of biological racism. The white working class was aided not only by their numerical size, but by their increasing accumulation of political resources that accompanied changes in their relations to the means of production; in other words, by their gradual transformation of increasing labor power into increasing political power.

NOTES

1. The term “system of production” not only refers to the technological basis of economic processes of, in Karl Marx’s terms, the “forces of production,” but it also implies the “social relations of production,” i.e., “the interaction (for example through employment and property arrangement) into which men enter at a given level of the development of the forces of production” (Smelser, 1973: xiv). According to Smelser, Marx used the notions “forces of production” and “social relations of production” as constituting the “mode of production.” However, in Marx’s writings the mode of production is often discussed as equivalent only to the
"forces of production." To avoid confusion, I have chosen the term "system of production" which denotes the interrelation of the forces of production and the mode of production.

2. Frazier (1957: 135) points out that: "The planter and propertied classes did not fail to take advantage of the traditional prejudices of the poor whites and the competition between the latter and the Negro to destroy any cooperation between the two groups. The poor whites were constantly subjected to propaganda concerning supremacy and purity of the white race."

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