Racial Inequality: Emphasis on Explanations

JAMES E. CONYERS—INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Three broad theoretical varieties of racial inequality are discussed: (1) deficiency theories; (2) bias theories; and (3) structural discrimination theories. Deficiency theories rest on the notion that racial inequality is due to deficiencies within the minority groups and has assumed three varieties: (a) biological, (b) structural and (c) cultural. The second broad category, bias theories, sees racial inequality as rooted in the biases of dominant group members. The third category, structural theories, locates explanations of racial inequality in the structure of society itself and has assumed two basic varieties: (a) class, and (b) colonial. The author reveals a greater ideological kinship with structural theories. The author concludes by suggesting that three basic strategies exist as remedies for racial inequality: (1) the civil rights strategy (prohibiting discrimination and enforcing the laws); (2) the poverty approach (helping the poor out of poverty; and (3) the affirmative action strategy (taking race into account). These and other remedies will be needed; however, prospects for the reduction of racial inequality for the larger majority of African Americans are not promising at the present time.

Social inequality is a topic of long standing concern in the social science; however, I will not attempt to document the evolution of this concern. In the brief span of this article I will be concerned about one principal type of social inequality, i.e., racial inequality; however, in as much as inequality by race is but one instance of social inequality in general, my discussion should have some degree of generalizability to the larger theoretical question of who gets how much of what and why.

All sorts if ideas, theories, and models are advanced to interpret, explain, or define the social fact of inequality by race. Theories of racial inequality can be divided into three broad categories: 1) deficiency theories, 2) bias theories, and 3) structural discrimination theories (Barrera, 1979). A discussion of these broad theoretical perspectives, and their sub-types, is the principal concern of this paper. But first, a few words about social inequality in general.

Leonard Reissman (1973) contends that an ideological bias exists in the American system with respect to inequality; a bias revealed in the manner in which the rhetoric and promise of “equality” is emphasized over the day-to-day realities of “inequality.” The serious student of inequality is thus put in an undignified position because one is much more likely to find information on “differences,” “opportunities,” “relations,” and the like, by race, age, sex, religion, and ethnicity, than information listed under “inequality.” These neutral-sounding types of emphases blur our understanding of inequality and allow us to emphasize “equality” over “inequality” without facing the contradictions that daily experience with inequality continue to produce.” (Reissman, 1)

As a general statement, the position is taken that the genesis of real social inequality, as opposed to mere social differentiation, is rooted in the evolution of the production process. The existence of surplus was a pre-condition for structured inequality. As Turner and Starnes state “…production of more than was absolutely necessary for survival created a basic problem: who should get how much?” (1976, 2)

Economic inequality is basic to an understanding of general social inequality, but a comprehensive view...
of inequality does not end here, for economic inequality makes possible other forms of inequality. According to Turner and Starnes:

"Once inequality is legitimated by ideas, the power of the wealthy is dramatically increased. They no longer must expend as many of their resources on forcing acceptance of their privilege; they can now use increased power to gather even more of the economic surplus" (Ibid., 3).

One of the inscriptive bases for the structuring of social inequality in America has been race. If social inequality is "...the condition whereby people have unequal access to valued resources, services, and positions in the society..." (Kerbo, 1983, 1) then demonstrating social inequality by race can be readily documented. As Reissman has said, "Being black in America means quite probably the inheritance of inequality in every aspect of life that makes a difference" (Ibid., 71). If this discussion had as its principal objective documentation of the fact of racial inequality, then all that would be needed would be to look at inequality in three of the principal institutions of American life, the educational, political, and economic institutions; however, since the objective of the paper is theoretical, and not descriptive, let us turn to a discussion of theories of racial inequality.

Deficiency Theories

Deficiency theories ultimately rest on the proposition that the inferior economic, social and political statuses of racial minorities are due to some deficiency within the minority groups (Barrera, 1979; 1974). In general, the causative deficiency has assumed three varieties: 1) biological, 2) structural, and 3) cultural. A brief discussion of each follows.

The Biological

Biological deficiency theories attribute racial inequality as genetic, hereditary inferiority or biological selectivity. Proponents of these theories assert that a race is inherently superior or inferior and that inequality in unconditional. Racism, as a doctrine justifying the subordination of races, emerged from individuals holding such a view. Some leading racist theorists have been Arthur DeGobineau and Houston S. Chamberlain in Europe and Madison Grant in the U.S. America has been so thoroughly racist historically that one can simply read the works and speeches of our great "democratic" fathers in America to detect classic expressions of racism. Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln would be good examples (John Hope Franklin, 1976, and James E. Conyers, 1981).

Explicit racist theories are not advocated frequently today; however, the works of Arthur Jensen ("How much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?", 1969), Hans J. Eysenck, 1971 (notion of blacks in America as a non-random inferior stock from Africa), Richard Herrnstein, 1971, (true equality leads to inequality, i.e., hereditary meritocracy) and Williams Shockley ("dysgenics"), are conducive to, if not directly, racist explanations. For a methodological criticism of genetics and intelligence, see the brilliant work by Howard F. Taylor, The IQ Game (1980), in which he seriously questions whether there is a "gene" for intelligence. Often overlooked is the convenience afforded by functionalism in stratification theory for a racist interpretation, i.e., differential privileges and rewards as attributable to the unequal possession of "scarce" talent.

I think it is clear that structured inequality in America, or the world, cannot be explained by biology or genetics. It is quite convenient for a people to believe that where it is, especially if where it is implies dominance, is due to natural endowments. Racist reactions and explanations emerged out of socio-political and economic circumstances, and it is not inconceivable that relative status losses or gains for blacks or whites during periods of drastic economic changes in the mode of production could result in a resurgence of racist expressions and reactions (such as we are witnessing now).

Deficiencies in Social Structure

The cause of racial inequality in these types of deficiency theories rests on the assumption that the reason racial groups are where they are is because of basic defects endemic to the structure of their groups, particularly supposed defects as manifested in such basic groups as the black family. Thus, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now a U.S. Senator from New York, posited the notion in 1965 that the Negro family exhibited a weak family structure and causes instability and male role confusion which results in social pathologies (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). The end result is low educational achievement, poverty and unemployment, i.e., racial inequality. As a country sociologist, it has never been very clear to me why Moynihan, or for that matter "strength of family" advocates (Hill, 1972), harp on the black family with such disdain and/or praise. Economic and political restructuring of the black family and American society might be a more profitable speech than a piecemeal social and psychological restructuring of the black family. The so-called "black matriarchy" is class related (Wilson, 1978; Engram, 1982). In addition, the
emphasis on maternal influence is misplaced in that maternal effects and influences are quite pervasive among most groups and classes in America (Hyman and Reed, 1969), and we are not sure if, or to what extent, the black family is, in fact, matriarchal (Engram, 1982).

**Cultural Deficiency Theories**

Cultural deficiency theories see racial inequality as emanating from cultural values and traits. The emphasis is not social structure, but attitudes and values. Attitudes and values of the minority group are seen as defective and deviant. They are counterproductive and inhibit achievement and success as determined by dominant group values. Generally, these theories assume that an independent, autonomous “lower class culture” or “culture of poverty” exists which impact negatively on individuals who share such a culture. Short-run hedonism, negativism, fatalism, maliciousness, lack of planning and lack of a work ethic are counterproductive cultural values and attitudes that handicap and place individuals who share these values at a “disadvantage.” Edward Banfield (1974), Oscar Lewis (1966) and Thomas Sowell (1975, 1981) are a few of the noted scholars who have attributed inequality among groups to differences in cultural values and attitudes.

Apart from the difficulty in establishing what a “cultural deficiency” is, culture-specific theories should not be seen as thoroughly and singularly causative; but rather as adaptive expressions in need of being placed within a more universalistic context so that we won’t be so inclined to view values and attitudes as a priori and self-generating. Stanley Lieberson’s award winning book, A Piece of the Pie (1981), is very critical on those who would account for differences between racial and ethnic groups on the basis of cultural differences without an independent measure of culture. Likewise, Lieberson finds no evidence that blacks are/were less committed to education than European immigrants.

When deficiency theories of any of the varieties I have discussed are employed, one should be cognizant of the possibility that the “deficiencies” in question might be results rather than “causes of the very conditions of racial inequality that these theories seek to explain.” (Barrera, 1979:1980)

Some deficiency theories have the effect of “blaming the victim,” William Ryan’s Blaming the Victim (1971) and Michael Lewis’ The Culture of Inequality (1978) are books worth reading.

**Bias Theories of Racial Inequality**

Bias theories are so frequently used by laymen and professionals to explain observed racial inequalities that they often provide little more than descriptions of observed racial differences. Prejudice and discrimination are the principal sources of racial inequality in “bias” theories; however, there is a crucial difference between “bias” theories and previously discussed “deficiency” theories: bias” theories place the responsibility for racial inequality on the dominant group and “deficiency” theories blame the group in question for its inequality. The responsibility for racial inequality in the United States is given to the White Anglo dominant group, often undifferentiated, according to the “bias” theories.

Two of the more respectable examples of “bias” theories can be found in the works of Gunnar Myrdal (1944) and Kenneth B. Clark (1965). In An American Dilemma, Myrdal sees racial inequality as a function of discrimination, which, in turn, is seen as a function of prejudice. A vicious prejudice-discrimination cycle is described where the “effects” of discrimination on blacks encourages and “justifies” further discrimination and prejudice by dominant group members. While Myrdal’s work is one of the most general statements on race relations, I feel that too much emphasis is placed on prejudice, guilt and the conscience of dominant group members in producing change in race relations in America. This is idealistic and simplistic in as much as it understates the history of struggle and conflict by minority group members in producing change and oversates the role-played by the “consciences” of dominant group members.

Kenneth B. Clark, in Dark Ghetto (1965), provides another example of this approach. Again prejudice and discrimination are the principal agents producing racial inequalities. Here a set of ghetto pathologies interact with inequalities in a self-reinforcing manner. Both the ghetto pathologies and inequalities are seen as having been produced by prejudice and discrimination.

Bias theories are attractive but difficult to evaluate. They are not as wrong as they are structurally and historically incomplete. This means that their importance as explanations of racial inequality diminishes as racial prejudice and discrimination decreases, independent of whether inequalities produced by structural changes in the economy, technology, and the like, are diminished.

**Structural Theories of Racial Inequality**

Structural theories are attractive to me because they locate their explanations of racial inequality in the structure of society itself and not in people’s “heads,” “bodies” and sub-cultural groupings. Now mind you, this is not to say that structural theories exhaust all of total

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empiric reality. I simply like their emphases, their etiological variables and the types of deductions they afford.

Structural theories of racial inequality can be divided into two broad categories: (1) class and (2) colo-
nial, and various combinations of these categories (Geschwender, 1978; Barrera, 1979).

**Class Theories**

Class theories represent a wide range of emphases, ranging from caste-class models to class approaches. Perhaps it is fair to say that Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his followers, however, were fundamentally interested in the evolution and nature of class inequality. In this respect, Marx was to social class what Sumner was to folkways.

Karl Marx was fundamentally interested in man’s universalistic relation to the means of production, the role of its (means of production) advancing nature in the production of two polarized classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, class conflict and the eventual establishment of socialist state in which the political and class character of the state and relations among people would be eliminated, or, at least, their structural character drastically minimized. Consequently, most Marxists are not likely to emphasize ethnicity, race, nationality, racism, prejudice, pluralism, etc., as having enduring value or primary significance in understanding or eradicating inequalities. In fact, a thorough commitment to them as ends in themselves are likely to have the effect of blurring, hampering, and interfering with one’s understanding of man’s basic relation to the mode of production. In short, such isms and ethnic conditions are epiphenomenal and divisive. This particular bent of Marx (plus the language he used) has led Franz Fanon and Dennis Forsythe to see Marx as biased and ethnocentric (Forsythe, 1973).

**Caste-Class**

Informed largely by the thinking of Robert E. Park of the University of Chicago, a number of scholars viewed America as having a caste system qualified by caste along racial lines. Caste was viewed as a ritualized body of customs, endogamous and hereditary, which circumscribed contacts and mobility by race. The “Chicago school” of sociology, along with Lloyd Warner and his associates, dominated the literature on class and race for more than a generation with this type of thinking (see Davis, Gardner and Gardner, 1941, and Dollard, 1957). The strength of this school was its treatment of racial inequality as more than a matter of prejudicial attitudes and its weakness was its highly descrip-
tive nature, which made it difficult to explain the origins and persistence of the caste-class system (Barrera, 1979, 187).

Oliver Cox, a black neo-Marxist, trained at the University of Chicago, broke with the caste-class school (Cox, 1948). He contended that the caste notion was not applicable to blacks in America. To him, institutional supports, basic values and a religious rationale did not exist in support of caste divisions by race in America. Even during slavery, race relations were close and personal. Race relations for Cox had to be seen in terms of class; they are essentially capitalist relations in that the ruling class pits white and black workers against each other and, thereby, forces the price of labor down. This idea by Cox anticipates the split-labor market notion, which has been more clearly developed in recent times by Bonacich (1972, 1976). Bonacich demonstrates the workings of the split-labor market under various conditions, historical periods and migration.

William J. Wilson, as much as any other one person, has demonstrated that race has been differentially significant at different times in American history. To him, during the modern industrial period, economic class affiliation is more important than race in determining the prospects for blacks in occupational achievement. Thus, Wilson describes a transition from racial oppression to economic class subordination, and titles his popular, and somewhat controversial, work, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Neo-Marxists Eugene Genovese (1971) and Baran and Sweezy (1966) have made similar contentions. This is not to say that Wilson is a Marxist. He is more Weberian; he emphasizes exchange relations and advocated reform of a coalition New Deal persuasion. At any rate, Genovese feels that modern American capitalism no longer has a strong need to perpetuate racial divisions as it did during the 19th century. Baran and Sweezy, on the other hand, believe that it is in the best interest of the ruling class in America to eliminate racial inequality because of the potential revolutionary danger implicit in such a large black underclass. A problem exists for the ruling class in this regard because, while the ruling class has pushed for racial equality, according to Baran and Sweezy, it has been hindered by its limited control of the system.

**Internal Colonial Model**

The idea of viewing blacks as a colony or nation is of longer standing than generally assumed. The Com- munist Party in the late 1920s and early 1930s viewed blacks as a submerged oppressed nation within America; but, as blacks moved out of the black-belt of
the south and became more geographically dispersed and less numerous in any one locality of the nation, the "submerged nation" idea was abandoned. (Geschwender, 1978, 70-80; Record, 1971, 54-119)

A more recent expression of blacks as a colony emerged out of the revitalistic movements of the 1960s, which mobilized people along racial and ethnic lines. Third World developments and cries for nationhood created a fertile atmosphere for colonial theories. Activists of this period frequently used the colonial model terminology. In academic circles, Robert Blauner became the chief advocate of this position (1972). He criticized the approach, which viewed blacks as the last wave of immigrants to enter urban America. Third World groups, he contended, were much more subjected to structurally rooted discrimination and oppression than earlier waves of immigrants. The black ghetto was viewed as a domestic or internal colony, a contained area dominated and controlled from without by a dominant white ruling class living outside the area and using it as a source of cheap labor.

The colonial model enjoys popularity and appeal to those who want to call attention to political oppression, self-determination and liberation of a geographically contained group. Its importance tends to diminish to the extent that racial and ethnic oppression do not correlate with territoriality. As a black population becomes more widely dispersed, more occupationally diversified, and less oppressed as a group, then, to that extent, colonial models will be less applicable.

**Concluding Remarks: Remedies**

A recent book, Remedies for Racial Inequality (1990), offers three strategies for remediying racial inequality: the civil rights strategy (prohibiting discrimination and enforcing the laws), affirmative action strategy (taking race into account), and the ladder-out-of-poverty strategy (helping the poor, closing the racial gap). Racial justice in the 1990s will continue to involve public discussion of these and other strategies as the nation attempts to develop consensus about strategies to achieve racial equality. At present, however, racial inequalities of the type addressed by these and other books and reports cannot be easily reduced unless the dominant group and controlling elites are willing, or forced, to give up some of the advantages. It does not appear that they will willingly give up enough of their advantages to make much difference in the lives of African Americans. Prospects are not very good for social and economic advancement at the present time. A tight economy and insensitive administrations generally have not worked to the advantage of minority groups and the truly disadvantaged. If anything, they produce or encourage a fertile atmosphere for additional relative losses for such groups. Witness that fact the racial incidents, racism, and race hatred groups are on the rise again, even on college campuses, and that civil liberties are being eroded, affirmative action enforcement is weak, and the political and economic system is becoming conservative and racially insensitive. Couple these trends with a growing African American under-class and an even larger group just above it whose basic employment, if any, is in a secondary market characterized by little job security, poor working conditions, low wages, and minimal mobility and benefits, and one may reasonably conclude that a potentially explosive situation exists which does not bode well for the future of race relations and racial equality in America.

**References**
